De-centring the academic: Preliminary reflections on academic identity and the role of the university in the 21st century

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Introduction

The rapid introduction of emergency remote learning at most universities around the world in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many aspects of habitual academic life. Already in 2020 a number of editorials and academic pieces appeared examining different higher education systems' responses to the crisis (Marginson, 2020; Gaeble et al, 2021), the significance of the movement to emergency remote teaching (ERT) as a prototyping moment of a "new higher education" (Williamson et al., 2020), and the changes that ERT under COVID introduced to the existing notions of time and space in higher education institutions (Burke and Manathunga, 2020). In South Africa the implementation of ERT was opposed as early as April 2020 by a group of academics across public universities who saw the potential of ERT to exacerbate existing social and institutional inequalities (Various signatories, 2020). In the second half of 2020, work started surfacing that began to look at the actual experience of moving from contact to remote teaching and learning. In South Africa, the most interesting piece among these so far is a cross sectoral publication with authors from 15 out of 26 public universities (Czerniewicz, et al., 2020). The paper is wide-ranging and compelling in most of its arguments about the impact of ERT, not only in accentuating inequality in South African higher education at different levels – for individual students, for individual universities and across the higher education system - but also in introducing new good practices in teaching and learning.

To date, the bulk of the concern in the higher education literature on the impact of COVID-19, both locally and internationally, has been focused on students, particularly on the impact that remote teaching could have in aggravating socio-economic inequalities - which are often the root cause of the achievement gap between middle-class and working-class and rural students. But the impact of COVID-19 and the concomitant move into ERT on academics has not received, as far as I can trace, similar attention. In this paper I turn the focus onto the academic. What has been the experience of this accelerated change? Most universities adapted their courses to an online environment within three weeks and continued in that mode for at least a further six months. What has this shift done to the sense of self of academics who used to teach in the physical face-to-face space of the classroom, following the linear time of the campus timetable? To what extent and how does this new experience change academic identities, roles and job descriptions, and with what consequences for the universities of the future?

In this paper, I argue that the current (self)-interrogation of academic identity caused by the introduction of ERT that I have observed, has to be read against two prior critical moments in the (re)definition of the academic: the rise of managerialism under neoliberal prescriptions at the end of the 20th Century, and the more recent (self)-questioning of academic identity and authority of the knowledge they teach that was a consequence of the Fallist movement, particularly in South Africa, followed by the spread of the BlackLivesMatter movement on university campuses across different geographies. The main argument of this paper is that, unlike challenges to academic identity in the context of managerialism or the Fallist movement that confronted what academics did at their workplace, ERT disturbs academic identity by taking academics physically away from the public space-time of the campus and locating their work and role into the space-time of their homes and private spheres, while at the same time,

thrusting into their lifeworlds the everyday social realities of their students' space-times. I believe both aspects of this experience have to be carefully examined in order to draw pedagogic as well as political conclusions that matter for the process of shaping the university and its place in society in the 21st century. Precisely because of this, it is important to be reminded that the rise of managerialism, the widespread up-take of the Fallist and BLM movements, and the move into ERT to deal with a pandemic, are not themes or problems circumscribed to universities alone, or even specific manifestations of global problems. These movements and events correspond with the nature of the global phase of capitalist development that we have witnessed since the early 1970s, aggravated by the financial crisis of 2008 (Bond, 2019; Boron, 2020; Dos Santos, 2020; Harvey, 2014 and 2020, Mason, 2015). Thus to analyse the changing academic identity in the context of COVID, I argue that one needs to situate not only the academic at the university, but also the university of the 21st century in the context of global-capitalism.

I write this paper from the position of senior university manager who has been responsible for leading the shift of all undergraduate programmes at one research-intensive contact university to ERT. In this role I have had privileged access to conversations across the university about the challenges we have faced and, more so than normally, access to the everyday concerns and anxieties of academics and middle managers in this regard. I have also had unrestricted access to the opinions of student leaders, institutional data sets as well on-going contact with professional support and service managers. The paper is written as a reflection against this back-drop of intense engagement with institutional and especially pedagogic change to meet the challenges of teaching during lockdown under the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My reflections are preliminary and tentative. They are based on the experience, events and data drawn from the implementation of ERT at the University of Cape Town, South Africa between

March and September 2020. The main data points come from a survey on students' access to data and devices conducted prior to the start of ERT (CILT, 2020a), a survey on students' experience conducted after the first term of ERT (CILT, 2020b), a survey on academics' staff experience (CILT, 2020 c), interaction with academic staff and documentation shared with management by the UCT academic union (UNION PAPERS). More empirical research will be needed to fully explore the argument I am advancing here.

This paper is organised into two sections. In section one I explore the shifts in academic identity that took place under neoliberal managerialism and the challenge to academic identity that emerged in the context of the student protests (2015-2017) and I compare these changes with what appears to be emerging under COVID. In section two, I investigate the transformation of notions and experiences of space-time during the pandemic and its disruptive impact on academics' perceptions of themselves, their jobs and their students. In section three, I examine the political, ethical and pedagogical limits of the current arguments about ERT and social inequality at the university that are constructed outside of a critique of capitalism. Finally, in the conclusion I make some suggestions to think possible futures for HE globally/ in the world.

Shifts in academic identity from TINA to COVID's "new normal"

There is broad agreement in the literature that the rise of neoliberalism in the North as a rationale for the recovery and expansion of global capitalism, in the aftermath of the 1970s financial crisis along with the incorporation of 'new public management' as an efficient way for states to run public institutions had a profound impact on how universities were perceived, organised, managed and funded (Neave, 1998; Henkel, 2005 and 2007; Bundy 2005; Mamdani, 2009; Rhoades and Maldonado, 2007). These changes unsettled what academics understood

their job and identity to be. They imposed a much stronger relation between state and market relevance and funding, greater competition for funding, the rise of academic research stars, external quality assurance by state agencies, competitive global rankings and the many measures of impact, satisfaction etc., not to mention the unabated rise of the notion of the student as customer and client (Nixon et al, 2016). All of this shifted the academic's sense of distance from market demands and state interference that had informed the old social contract between academia and society, namely the 'academic freedom' to teach what, by whom and to whom they chose.

Since the 1980s a deeper wedge marked the distance between management and academics (Rhoades and Maldonado, 2007) while the new status of the student as client changed the pedagogic relationship considerably (Nixon et al, 2016). Add to this the impact of social media on academics' lives, as students express their opinions freely on social media platforms before a watchful management, often more preoccupied with institutional reputation than with truth or facts. Castells (2009: 4) argues that internet based communication transforms relations of power in society through the introduction of multimodal mass communication, interactive social networks and access to mass-self communication. Especially the latter has fractured the boundaries around previously safe social spaces with far reaching impact on academics' sense of security and self. Academics have often found themselves cowed and less motivated to carry out what they assumed to be their role, due to students' comments in the public glare of social media (The Philadelphia Enquirer, 27 November 2017; THE, 31 May 2019).

In relation to research and teaching, Henkel (2007:95-97) argues that the need for academics to demonstrate to management and government that their work was both useful and responsive had several consequences such as competition for resources; differentiated levels of funding

across disciplines; the organisation of faculties; the separation of research and teaching; and the introduction of changes in the curriculum to deliver more market-ready graduates.

Despite all of this, the challenge to academic life in the managerial university in the digital age did not quite touch that "sacred" place of academic identity: membership and custodianship of the disciplinary community (Becher, 2001). While certain fields of knowledge became less fashionable and poorly funded; while small academic departments were merged by managerial fiat, everday life at universities continued more or less as before. Academics walked into classrooms, gave lectures, ran tutorials and seminars, set exams and held consultation hours in their offices. They researched, published and taught in the midst of debates and controversies that may have challenged their thinking and even their disciplinary assumptions, but their academic authority remained firmly rooted in their disciplinary expertise. The origin and value of their knowledge fields, and their assumed authority based on their disciplinary expertise was not open to question. In other words, although put off-balance by the introduction of management systems, satisfaction surveys and KPAs, academics soldiered on, with their sense of self shaken but still intact - until recently.

The 21st Century has delivered particularly harsh challenges to the foundation of academic identity through both decolonial critiques of knowledge and the impact of digital technologies on curriculum and pedagogy.

In the 21st century a new form of dissonance begun to spread from campuses in the global South across the world in the form of student protests linked to RhodesMustFall in its different locales and then Black Lives Matter. The protesting students angrily questioned the authority of academics, of the university and of the knowledge produced and taught through the

disciplines. This, I argue, de-centred academics from the key positions they had occupied hitherto. What RMF/BLM did was to question the epistemic authority of academics and undermine the very foundational assumptions that underpinned the disciplines they professed. But the protest movements also questioned academics existentially and ontologically, challenging their identities, subjectivites and positionalities – by questioning the legitimacy of of who they were, where they came from and how they positioned themselves in respect of the call for a decolonised university. Of course, this challenge to academic identity was particularly felt by white academics, since unsettling the (neo) colonial space of the university, whether this took place in Africa, Latin America, the US or Europe, implied unsettling "white" people and "white" knowledge. Many (white academics) felt intellectually displaced by the anger and intensity of the confrontations, while Black academics, often for the first time, found new possibilities and political and academic spaces opening up in which they could establish a sense of belonging, agency and voice at the university. This re-positioning and displacement, however, happened within familiar coordinates of time and space. The protests happened on university campuses and were punctuated by the familiar times of lectures, meetings, assemblies, etc. The university was still a physical community of scholars and students, even though the power relations between the various social actors were being challenged and changed.

The impact of digital technologies in the global economy has been extraordinary in terms of the speed and range with which it has moved. Since the publication of Castell's *The Rise of the Network Society* in 1996, the expansion of the informational economy and the financialisation of capital on a global scale has been phenomenal. Different sectors of the economy have experienced this phenomenon differently. Higher education, firmly in the list of services to be sold according to the World Trade Organisation's General Agreement of Tariff and Services

(CHE, 2003) has seen different degrees of transformation in terms of the organisation of its work and distribution of its "products" in the last three decades. Digital technologies guarantee maximum reach in an ever growing global market for skills and education. Hence the allure for higher education to become a technology-based business.

One aspect of this marketisation of higher education when it intersects with the impact of technology is "unbundling" , the disaggregation of curriculum and the services necessary for its delivery between universities and private providers of services. As presented in a recent policy briefing (REFERENCE), unbundling and the marketisation of higher education operate differently depending on context, yet they have some elements in common: a rise in the number of alternative providers of education including the rise of a specialised division of labour between those who develop content, those who teach, those who offer student support, etc. Whatever the positive aspects of this transformation of higher education in terms democratisation of access to skills, it also has important and questionable consequences for the notion of education as a public good as well as the ability of academics to profess in a discipline. From this point of view the digitisation of higher education, particularly the offering of education online, can and does change the role of the academic as an authority in the discipline and the expert fully responsible for the curation of knowledge.

Fast-forward to 2020. Enter a global pandemic that disrupts and displaces the entire world to avoid contagion. For those universities that already operated as distance online universities there has been comparatively little disruption. But for contact universities like UCT, the disruption has been phenomenal. In the next section I look at some of these disruptions and discuss how they seem to be affecting academic identity.

Academics out of place and time

At the beginning of the lockdown, UCT ran a survey of students' access to data, connectivity and devices (reference). In this survey students were asked, among other things how many hours per day they would be able to dedicate to learning from home. Their answers to these questions shaped the nature of remote learning that would be offered: low-tech; asynchronous; short videos, narrated and captioned power-point presentations. In terms of workload, the norm used was that students could not dedicate more than 30 hours per week to learn, as opposed to the norm of 45 hours per week.

The consequences of this decision for academics were far-reaching. First, the decision to implement ERT takes the academic out of her central position on the stage and at the podium of the lecture hall. Secondly, asynchronous online delivery takes away academics' opportunity and ability to read their audience: to get a sense of who is understanding; who is not listening; who is bored. There are no opportunities for immediate feedback and classroom interaction. The potential conviviality and spontanaeity of interaction in the classroom context cannot be reproduced in ERT. Affect requires shared time and space which are erased by asynchronous, low tech lecture videos. Thirdly, the opportunity to display or profess one's mastery of the discipline is diluted: the 45 minute performance academics used to offer has been cut into 15 minute chunks to accommodate technological constraints. The solo performance in time and space is replaced by captioned, voice over power point presentations. Fourthly, academics become disembodied voices operating from another place and time. The lecture recorded today will be seen by each student in their own time. The community of students and scholars that constituted the oldest definition of the university is apparently broken because it does not exist in a synchronous time-space. ERT then radically modifies the privilege of the academic to

profess and lecture before a community. The individual performance (a combination of disciplinary proficiency and pedagogic ability) becomes less important than the mastery of technology. Preparing a lecture, developing the curriculum for a course was, until now, a relatively solitary act in which academics exercised their expertise in the subject and their pedagogic know-how to construct a performance or an event that they could control and master. In order to take this same content online academics now needed help from staff with technical skills and different kinds of knowledge. Academics look, or at least feel, deskilled; some of their self-assurance is gone. They are not re-enacting what is familiar, but must learn new skills.

Between March and August the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching at UCT ran 99 webinar sessions with an attendance of over 2500 staff. (ref) This level of unprecedented participation in support activities shows how many academics understood that they needed help to transition to remote teaching. From an individual display of personal mastery in "normal time", the preparation of a lecture now becomes also an exercise in grappling with new tools, new ways of thinking about the organisation and structuring of content and learnig activities with which many academics were not really familiar. This lowered their confidence in their ability to perform and do their teaching job.

The long-term consequences of this new situation for the "academic workforce" are many and it will be important to continue to explore them as we have more information. Questions to answered include: Would a new division of labour emerge, at research universities in particular, where top researchers are "spared" from undergraduate teaching; would the lion's share of the teaching effort be delegated to teaching assistants and tutors, depriving students from contact with senior academics; would the demand for instructional designers and a range of online learning jobs increase to incorporate these functions into the workforce of academic

departments? What would all of this mean for the already concerning casualisation and juniorisation of academic staff and the future of the academic profession? Bibliography

From the very beginning of emergency remote teaching, it was clear that if support and tutorial systems were a key ingredient for successful undergraduate learning, then the specific conditions of remote teaching under COVID-19, made that support all the more necessary. Students who came to UCT from low socio-economic backgrounds experienced material and psycho-social obstacles to learning (ref) that required the university to be especially supportive and able to monitor their participation. A number of services were put in place to this effect, but most academics themselves were very much at the coalface of student support.

Under "normal" circumstances academics have set consultation hours with their students that happen in their offices and also via email. Some lecturers use Whatsapp groups to communicate with their students, but this communication was mostly bounded by the physical environment of the campus and tended to be more about academic matters than about students' lives at home, because most of the undergraduate students were living in university residences. The intensity of the support provided to students both academically and emotionally during the implementation of ERT was remarked upon by both students and academics in the surveys (ref). These interactions created a new, deeper and more personalised knowledge of students and their lives than that normally acquired on campus (ref).

In terms of the actual work of the university teacher, most academics spent double preparation time for their online lectures than what they normally did for face-to-face lectures (ref). Questions about workload, burnout, lowering of expectations in terms of research productivity and issues around promotions and performance management started coming up in

conversations at faculty level (ref – even if personal communication). What does this mean for my workload, my identity as researcher, my use of my time and my space? Many academics recognised that a great deal of what they did during this period was not part of their job description, nor was it what they had signed up for - which does not mean, they did not carry out all that was required of them to support the teaching and learning effort under COVID-19 (ref).

Finally, academics, were also working people under lockdown, so the virtual space of the university started residing "physically" in the spaces of their homes. The permeability between home and work blurred the line between working hours and family time and between public and private spheres.

Time and space in the postcolony

In the last few years, partially driven by the rise of the digital university, there has been a growing reflection about time and space in higher education. The digital university is seen as an organisation that is both trans-local and trans-temporal, that needs to be responsive to different times and spaces in order to provide support that matches the diverse contexts and needs of its students (Sheail, 2016). This characteristic of the digital university requires a much more nuanced understanding of time and space than the traditional/ modernist one that permeates contact universities. However, these reflections have further reach, unsettling? touching? the notion of time and space in higher education more broadly (Bennett and Burke, 2017; Burke and Manathunga, 2020). This literature? recognises that time and space for those in higher education (students and staff) is managed within a normative framework (Bennett and Burke, 2017). This normative framework, as the authors aptly put it, "erases recognition

of subjectivity and differences" and presumes that "time is ahistorical, disembodied and simply objective" (Bennett and Burke, 2017: 914) and that spaces are empty until filled. On the contrary, the authors argue that "space-time is deeply relational, contextual and experiential - forming overarching narratives of higher education (Burke and Manathunga, 2020: 663). This is even more so when one looks at higher education from the location of the postcolony: "a time-space characterised by proliferation and multiplicity" (Mbembe, 2002). In the postcolony the time of modernity that is linear/ lineal? and progressive, marked by clocks and global networks is inscribed and superimposed by multiple time-spaces, which are not lineal and progressive, all of which weave in and out of each other and operate simultaneously. Think of the space-time disjunctures of students who come to a university located in a global city from a rural village and who return to their village during vacations, or urban based students who live in a township shack and commute to a suburban university daily. These students operate simultaneously in at least two space-times have different personal experiences of time and space. Yet, at the modern university (based on the industrial factory model), for all staff and students, regardless of their different contexts and experiences, time-space is rigidly defined within tightly boundaried spaces, as linear, progressive time that is segmented, fast-paced and controlled by one-size-fits-all timetables and calendars.

The implementation of ERT in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic subverted and disrupted the lineal, homogenous, progressive time-space of the university. It opened a window onto different experiences of space-time which until now had remained hidden from view: the realities of the space-times of student lives. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the introduction of ERT at UCT, as for many universities, was preceded by a survey of student access to digital technology and their ability to study online. This made clear that around 30 percent of UCT students were in a vulnerable situation in terms of the social and technical

infrastructure available to them to perform adequately in an ERT context (reference). While the circumstances of students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been a constant matter of concern and the focus of policies and interventions at UCT for a long time, never before has the preoccupation with inequality (and the impact of ERT on exacerbating social inequalities) been as intense and widespread.

The impact of ERT on existing inequality became the more obvious with regard to the constraints on students' use of space and time. Furthermore, among the practices and behaviours introduced by the pandemic, students reported that academics had become more understanding and flexible in the way they approached students' issues. Academics in turn have become more aware of their students' social realities both in terms of time (how could they use their time) and space (the household/ family conditions in which they must now live and study) (reference).

The implementation of ERT replaced the homogenous, collective, neutral time-space of the campus time-table for the lived time-space of the students. Two realisations took place especially among academics: i) the academic time of the university campus, the time-space in which the community of scholars and students normally exist, obscures the differences in time-space that academics and students inhabit; ii) access to and the freedom to use time-space for scholarly activities is severely constrained by class, gender and race. This includes the realisation that time and space are "available", "measured" and "managed" differently for women and men, for middle class and working class or unemployed people, and for young, old and disabled people. The realisation that space and time are conditioned/ constituted by race, class, gender and disability and their many contextual intersections was an eye opener for many

academics not only for re-thinking their curriculum and pedagogic practice, but also, for thinking more deeply about the structuring of the social realities in which we live.

As Mbembe (2001) has argued, the space-time of the postcolony brings to the forefront the interlocking nature of multiple times (past, present and future); the unstable character of time and the importance of the unforeseen, as elements of existence in the postcolony. The postcolony is not about the experience of a time before and after the colony, but a combination and coexistence of different temporalities (emerging time) and the subjectivities that emerge from this (Mbembe, 2001: 16).

The importance of this reconceptualization of space-time as socially constituted for rethinking pedagogy and for the manner in which academics/ universities? approach digitally-enabled pedagogies in the future cannot be stressed enough. The consequences of this "discovery" of the postcolonial conditioning of time-space in South Africa, could serve as a point of departure from which to reinvent the university itself, away from homogenous and limiting Western conceptions of linear time and neutral space.

There is broad recognition that despite the effort, the anxieties and the difficulties universities faced during the period of the pandemic, a great deal has been learnt and changes that would have taken years to implement have been put in place within a matter of weeks or months. There is still a long way to go in the context of the cycle of the pandemic and already much is being said and written? in local and supranational spaces about the post-COVID future and possible "new normal(s)" (refs?). But for the future to be worth living we need to shape it; and for that to happen we need to walk into it with our eyes wide open about the contradictions, the

risks and the possibilities of rethinking the academic project in general and teaching and learning in particular, under new conditions.

In order to do this with an acceptable level of depth, I believe we need to think again about the university as a social institution and the world within which it exists.

Universities in society

Rethinking the university as a social institution implies situating it within a concrete social formation that both constrains and enables its possibilities and constitutes the boundaries within which it must operate. This is seldom done. With important exceptions (ref), reflections on the impact of neoliberalism on higher education tend to become critiques of neoliberalism and managerialism. The critique of the commodification of education and of higher education's "responsiveness" to the labour market, to mention just two issues, seldom penetrates to critique the social formation of the university or to investigate what the role of the university could be in a post-capitalist world. Is this world possible, what would it look like and what might be the role of the university in contributing to the emergence of such a world?

In the context of the COVID-pandemic, there are murmurings that a different way of living might or should emerge post the pandemic. Yet it is still far from clear whether the reset button is to be pressed to achieve a another stakeholder form of capitalism or whether more serious and far-reaching changes are being imagined.

Across the globe, from the most advanced economies to the most precarious societies, the pandemic has exposed the cracks in the system: from the disproportionate toll of the disease

on poor and black populations, unequitable access to vaccines to the multi-billion profits that the "1 percent" has made from the crisis. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the positive impact of the lockdown on travel on CO_2 emissions.

South Africa, already ranked the most unequal society in the world (ref Gini coefficient?), is having a particularly difficult time analysing the social impact of the pandemic, and it effects on historical structural inequality (Soudien, Reddy and Woolard, 2019). As mentioned earlier, specifically in the public higher education sector, a historical preoccupation with disadvantage has reached untold centrality in institutional as well as sectoral discourse (refs). Yet at the time of responding to the question 'what is to be done to ameliorate inequality of access to ERT?' the immediate, (correct and inescapable), response has involved buying computers and data, providing extra support, offering discounted fees, extending assessment deadlines. The response has been necessarily managerialist: management teams identify the problem, analyse the risk and mobilise (as far as possible) the necessary resources to manage the crisis. The real obstacles/ barriers to access lie beyond the reach of the higher education system's agency, universities as institutions of civil society do not have the power to remedy the causes of inequality. This, however, does not mean that something else, over and above the immediate, managerial response, is not possible. as a more comprehensive response from higher education to the event of the pandemic and the crisis of the system.

The next step in the way the pandemic is being dealt with in supranational organisations such as the World Economic Forum, is to imagine the future: the new normal. Taking their cue from this discourse, university leaders are also imagining the new normal. Is it possible to imagine the future without stopping long enough to look at how the world system works for the pandemic to have happened as it did? Universities as institutions, are far removed from both a

serious critique of the political-economy that has brought society to this point and from proposing a radical transformation of the place they occupy in society in order to enter into this debate.

In the collective paper on the impact of COVID at 15 SA public universities, referred to earlier, the authors observed that the success of individual institutions in addressing the crisis should not leave off-the-hook those accountable for the structural conditions that make the work of universities so difficult and in many ways ineffective.

I argue that while the South African government has many questions to answer in relation to the wisdom (and morality) of its policy choices and implementation inefficiency, the issue of the structural conditions of inequality invites universities to look at themselves, not simply in terms of the abstract 'public good' they claim to represent, but in terms of concrete social justice issues that they could grapple with – perhaps starting with repurposing their missions and rethinking just action within their own communities.

COVID-19 is an event that is surfacing the contradictions inherent in the social and economic system within which we live. These contradictions, including the impact of the fossil fuel economy on the environment, have been flagged for decades from the fringes (Amin, 2010; Bond, 2019; De Sousa Santos, 2020). Now that some of these issues are being acknowledged at "the centre" is this not an opportunity for universities to use their capacity to research and to educate to make a purposeful and direct contribution to these very issues, according to their different areas of influence and expertise?

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the move into ERT precipitated a deep change in the role of teaching academics at residential contact universities. This shift has not only questioned concrete aspects of what academics do but also who they are. At the same, ERT has unsettled the modernist perception of time-space on university campuses as universal, linear and neutral, opening up an opportunity to (re)think the nature of space-time as relative to context and constitutive of and constituted by the social – including educational processes.

I have argued that the importance of this realisation, combined with the cruel surfacing of the internal contradictions of globalised capitalism and their impact on the well-being of people and nature, is such that it should invite universities to reconsider their roles in society.

In making decisions about the future, I have suggested that universities need to consciously position themselves, not only in relation to technological advances, but also in the light of looming ecological and social catastrophes/ dystopias. From where will they enter the future? from the reproduction of a tweaked *status quo* or from a critique and the will to transform the *status quo* and an understanding of their own role within this. Or do universities enter the future by jumping onto the bandwagon of new educational fads - such as AI or online education technologies - without thinking through their assumptions and their consequences?

There is much that universities have learnt in managing their core functions during the pandemic that is worth taking into the future. But universities need to enter the future, like Said's intellectual (ref), from a position of critique of existing relations of power, both within their state formations as well as within the political-economy of an increasingly rapacious/ unaccountable global capitalist system.

For this to be possible it is necessary to harness the de-centred epistemological and ontological selves of the academics, together with the new awareness of the multiple and relative space-times that students inhabit to develop appropriate pedagogies. But universities need to harness the newly discovered power of technology and online learning in such a way that it challenges the *status quo* ethically and politically and takes institutions forward on a decolonial trajectory. And of this needs to be done with 'eyes wide open' about the traps of technology itself (Carr, 2011; Lanier, 2011; Zuboff, 2019). This will only be possible if university leaders and academics accept the challenge that their role in shaping a better world is far more pointed going forward.

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