

Pandemic Privatisation in Higher Education: Edtech & University Reform

Summary of research findings

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, a state of emergency engulfed higher education (HE). The crisis of mass campus closures and a rapid 'pivot' to online learning became the context for attempts by private actors and commercial organisations to reconfigure the sector. Besides the immediate and necessary short-term 'relief' provided by education and technology providers during campus closures, commercial organisations and private sector promoters sought to 'reconstruct' HE for the long term. Temporary emergency measures were treated as experimental opportunities to establish a new 'digital normalcy' in which private and commercial actors could play a substantially increased role in schools, colleges and universities worldwide, with wide-ranging implications for the experience of students and the working lives of staff.

The effects are likely to continue unfolding as institutions and national systems deal with the rolling disruptions of the pandemic, and the emergency 'pivot online' translates into long-lasting sectoral changes. Digital technologies can bring many benefits to HE, but many of the transformational changes promoted during the pandemic present serious challenges.

The report documents key ways commercialisation and privatisation of HE have been - and continue to be - advanced through digital technologies in the context of COVID-19, identifying issues and implications for more detailed discussion and deliberation once HE sets out on the long path to post-pandemic recovery. The findings raise issues over whether higher education is understood as a sector that serves social, political and cultural purposes, as a central institution of democracy, or whether it is perceived, more instrumentally, as an engine for producing measurable learning performance and associated workforce productivity gains.

Across the globe, there is a pressing need to support the freedom of HE workers and their right to participate in the formulation and implementation of institutional policies, collective agreements and regulatory frameworks around teaching and learning. This includes edtech (educational technologies) and its impact on academic freedom, decent work, quality education as well as data governance and privacy.



HE stakeholders including academic staff, students, and the unions that represent them should work urgently, and collegially, to define alternative imaginaries that can guide post-pandemic recovery of HE. Unions, as representatives of education and research personnel and defenders of equitable, quality public education, have a critical role to play in advocating what they imagine the future of HE to be, and how this vision might promote the right to education for all persons around the world.

The findings of this research confirm that urgent action is necessary.

Pandemic privatisation through multi-sector policy

Emergencies produce catalytic opportunities for market-oriented privatisation policies and commercial reforms in education. The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an exceptional opportunity for expanding privatisation and commercialisation in HE, particularly through the promotion of edtech as short-term solutions to campus closures and the positioning of private sector actors as catalysts and engineers of post-pandemic HE reform and transformation. The pandemic privatisation and commercialisation of HE during the COVID-19 emergency is a multi-sector process involving diverse actors that criss-cross fields of government, business, consultancy, finance, and international governance, with transnational reach and various effects across geographical, social, political, and economic contexts. It exemplifies how 'disaster techno-capitalism' has sought to exploit the pandemic for private sector and commercial advantage.

Higher education reimaged as digital and data-intensive

Diverse organisations from multiple sectors translated the public health crisis into an opportunity to reimagine HE for the long

term as a digitally innovative and data-intensive sector of post-pandemic societies and economies. While face to face teaching constituted an urgent global public health threat, it was also constructed by organisations including education technology businesses, consultancies, international bodies and investors as a longer-term problem and threat to student 'upskilling', 'employability', and global post-coronavirus economic recovery. Framed as a form of 'emergency relief' during campus closures, education technologies were also presented as an opportunity for investment and profit-making, with the growing market of edtech framed as a catalytic enabler of long-term HE reconstruction and reform.

Transformation through technology solutionism

Education technologies and companies became highly influential actors in HE during the pandemic. Private organisations and commercial technologies have begun to reform colleges and universities from the inside, working as a social and technical infrastructure that shapes institutional behaviours and, as programmed pedagogical environments, determines the possible organisation of teaching and learning. In the absence of the physical infrastructure of campuses and classrooms during the pandemic, institutions were required to develop digital infrastructure to host online teaching. This opened up new and lucrative market opportunities for vendors of online learning technologies, many of which have actively sought to establish positions as partners in long-term transformations to the daily operations of colleges and universities. New kinds of technical arrangements, introduced as temporary emergency solutions but positioned as persistent transformations, have affected how teaching is enacted, and established private and commercial providers as essential infrastructural intermediaries between educators and students. These technologies are enacting significant changes to the teaching and learning operations and practices of HE institutions, representing a form of solutionism that treats all problems as if they can be fixed with digital technologies.

New public-private partnerships and competition

New public-private partnerships developed during the pandemic blur the boundaries between academic and industry sectors. Partnerships between academic institutions and the education and technology industries have begun to proliferate with the development of business models for the provision of online teaching and learning platforms. Global technology companies including Amazon, Google, Alibaba and Microsoft have sought to extend their cloud and data infrastructure services to an increasing number of university partners. Colleges and universities are also facing increasing competition from private 'challenger' institutions, new industry-facing 'digital credential' initiatives, and employment-based 'education as a benefit' schemes offering students the convenience of flexible, affordable, online learning. These developments enhance the business logics of the private sector in HE, privileging education programs that are tightly coupled to workplace demands, and expand the role of for-profit organisations and technologies in the provision of education.

Increasing penetration of artificial intelligence (AI) and surveillance

Edtech companies and their promoters have increased the deployment of data analytics, machine learning and artificial intelligence in HE, and emphasised the language and practices of 'personalised learning' and 'data-driven decision-making'. Organisations from across the sectoral spectrum have highlighted the importance of 'upskilling' students for a post-pandemic economy allegedly dominated by AI and automation and demanding new technical competencies. AI has also been enhanced through the deployment of large-scale data monitoring tools embedded in online learning management software, surveillance technologies such as distance examination proctoring systems, and campus safety systems such as student location and

contact tracing apps. In imaginaries of the AI-enabled future of HE, next-generation learning experiences will be 'hyperindividualised' and scaled with algorithms, coupled with digital credentialing and data-driven alignment of education with work.

Challenges to academic labour, freedom and autonomy

The professional work of academic educators has been affected by the increasing penetration of the private sector and commercial technology into HE during the pandemic. Staff have had little choice over the technologies they are required to employ for their teaching, resulting in high-profile contests over the use, in particular, of intrusive surveillance products or concerns over the potential long-term storage and re-use of recorded course materials and lectures. Academic educators have been required to double up their preparation and delivery of classes for both in-person and online formats. Classes and events featuring 'controversial' speakers or critical perspectives have been cancelled due to the commercial terms of service of providers of online video streaming platforms. The expansion of data analytics, AI and predictive technologies also challenges the autonomy of staff to make professionally informed judgments about student engagement and performance, by delegating assessment and evaluation to proprietorial software that can then prescribe 'personalised learning' recommendations on their behalf. Finally, academic freedom is at risk when online teaching and learning conducted in an international context runs counter to the politics of certain state regimes, leading to concerns over censorship and the suppression of critical inquiry in remote education. Moreover, the fact that lectures are now recorded and posted online - and subjected to surveillance by administrators - has potentially heightened concerns about the way staff are censoring their curriculum content, and highlights the extent to which contemporary academic work is embedded in surveillance and censorship infrastructures.

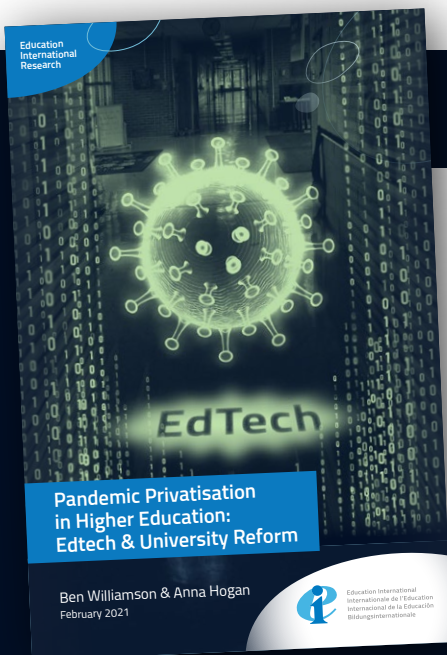
Reproducing inequalities

Many students, particularly those with monetary resources, have been able to maintain a connection to their HE degree throughout the pandemic. But there are also students that have been left with little option other than to pause or cancel their enrolments. Inequities are shaped by gender, class, culture, race and geopolitical context among other factors.

Alternative imaginaries of post-pandemic HE

Online teaching and learning is neither inevitably transformative nor necessarily deleterious to the purpose of universities, the working conditions of staff, or the experience of students. However, the current reimagining of HE by private organisations, and its instantiation in commercial technologies, should be countered with robust, critical and research-informed alternative imaginaries

centred on recognising the purpose of higher education as a social and public good. The appearance of manifestos and networks dedicated to this task demonstrates a widespread sense of unease about the ways emergency measures are being translated into demands to establish a new 'digital normalcy' in HE. Educators, students, and their unions should dedicate themselves to identifying effective practices and approaches, countering the imposition of commercial models that primarily focus on profit margins or pedagogically questionable practices, and developing alternative imaginaries that might be realised through collective deliberation and action.



Similar research on pandemic privatisation focusing on primary and secondary education can be found here: <https://go.ei-ie.org/GRCovid19>



The full research paper by Ben Williamson and Anna Hogan can be found here: <https://eije.io/PandemicPrivatisation>



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