

Book review: Fleming, Peter (2021). Dark academia.

How universities die. Pluto Press.

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Dark academia's declared purpose is a description and explanation of the hidden psychological injuries endured by students and academics in contemporary universities. To state it clearly right at the beginning of this review, this is an excellent and important book that I strongly recommend to all stakeholders in higher education, including students. Its author Peter Fleming is a professor at University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Business School whose previous academic output has focused on the future of work and its ethical implications.

Both the book's main title (Dark academia) and its subtitle (How universities die) require further explanation. 'Dark academia' refers not only to the economic aspect of the student debt mountain, but more specifically to other 'dark' aspects of the neoliberal university such as despair, depression, chronic stress and anxiety, self-harm, and in extreme cases, suicides amongst students and academics. Fleming observes that universities that made themselves overly dependent on the lucrative international student market found themselves in a world of trouble when the coronavirus and concomitant travel restrictions emerged in 2020. Fleming's more original thesis is, however, that universities were already gravely ill pre-pandemic. His book discusses symptoms of what he perceives as a terminal illness of the neoliberal (privatised, corporatised, marketised and financialised) university. In Fleming's analysis, universities are in mortal danger largely due to "bad management and hostile government budgets" (p. 157), with the global pandemic an added conundrum. The alarming picture that Fleming paints runs counter to the fairy tale image of a "recondite club of tweed-jacketed, pipe smoking professors who think all day and pen esoteric research papers once every few years" (p. 156).

In the introductory chapter, Fleming provides a useful historical overview of four shifts that the university-as-we-know-it has undergone. Wilhelm von Humboldt's ideal of higher education was influenced by the Enlightenment and emerged in the early 19th century. It promoted a holistic combination of research and teaching in an environment of academic freedom (for both teachers and students) in order to transform students into autonomous individuals and global citizens. Although Humboldt's vision constituted an important

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breakthrough (that was by and large adopted by the early 20th century US liberal university and elsewhere), the university envisaged and enacted by him was still elitist and dominated by white male privilege, amongst other flaws. A second historical shift that occurred starting from around the 1960s was the so-called academic revolution that led to the massification of university admission.

The academic revolution eventually led to a counter-revolution and the birth of the neoliberal university from the mid-1980s onwards. In the UK (Jarratt Report), Australia (Dawkins Reforms), and in New Zealand (Todd Report), for instance, government reports recommended a top-down managerialism and the metrification of academic work. The fourth shift to an edu-factory (and even further removed from Humboldt's ideal) is an acceleration of the neo-corporatised university due to the current pandemic. To cite Fleming: "Beleaguered by managerial-bloat, business bullshit and a Covid-compromised economic environment, the idea of the modern university may soon come to an end" (p. 19).

Chapter 2 argues that contemporary higher education produces "damaged people" (who are stressed, fatigued, depressed, and perhaps even suicidal), providing a sharp contrast with the promises of glossy university brochures (p. 22). While self-actualising scholars have historically demonstrated great self-motivation, the current involuntary workaholicism at universities has been further exacerbated by the pandemic.

In chapter 3, Fleming argues that the neoliberalisation of society has been paralleled by the "businessification" (p. 36) of universities, leading to the phenomenon of the edu-factory where a premium is charged for employability outcomes, in line with the "cult of work" (p. 36). Higher education has been revamped as an "industrial-complex" and a "leading export sector" (p. 36). Especially in higher education's three major export countries – the U.S., the UK, and Australia – the majority of teaching staff are part of the gig economy. Especially in the U.S., the Uberfication and exploitation of an underclass of adjuncts described by Fleming is worthwhile quoting:

"Today around 75 per cent of teaching staff are untenured, a massive growth in only a few years. They get paid about US\$2500 per course and receive no healthcare or pension benefits. Adjuncts frequently fall below the poverty line and require welfare assistance. Sleeping in their cars and showering in college gyms isn't unheard of" (p. 46).

Chapter 4 focuses on the "authoritarian turn in universities" (p. 50). In addition to the regular bureaucracy, there is what Fleming calls their informal and neurotic dimension of darkocracy, based on power networks controlled by university managers. Fleming cites Ginsberg's *The fall of the faculty* when he describes the expansion of non-academic personnel *via-a-vis* academics. Ginsberg bemoaned that universities were increasingly "filled with armies of functionaries – the vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, vice provosts, assistant provosts, deans, deanlets, deanlings, each commanding staffers and assistants – who, more and more, direct the operations of every school" (cited in p. 52). Fleming, when writing about the chronic

overwork at universities, distinguishes ‘real work’ from ‘sludge work’. Sludge work encompasses activities such as filling in forms and following procedures that are caused by over-bureaucratisation; they “add little intrinsic value, yet absorb significant amounts of time” (p. 58).

Chapter 5 focuses on university senior managers’ obsession with metrification and big data that has been cemented by governmental funding structures. Metric-mania can create mindless performance targets linked to crass incentive systems that in turn may lead to the loss of collegiality and hyper-competitive careerism. A veritable tyranny of metrics – student evaluation scores; journal quality rankings, discipline-level tables, and journal impact factors; research grants; Google citation ratings, H- and i10-indices – is used for appraisals and promotions.

This short-termist metric-fixation cannot capture genuine scholarly work that is complex and time-consuming, as Goodhart’s law of perverse incentives shows. Goodheart’s law can be exemplified in several ways. For instance, rewarding faculty for increased publications may lead to a growth in substandard papers, incremental-orientated research, and even an increase in false or misleading use of data; or rewarding academics for increased citations may lead to increased self-referencing, and “journal reviewers and editors insisting their own papers be cited” (p. 78). The metrification of student evaluations has also led to grade inflation and the teaching of content that could be easily mistaken for entertainment. The validity and reliability of quantitative research is imperiled by unethical practices such as p-hacking (the manipulation of data analysis in order to misrepresent a favoured result as statistically significant), HARKing (hypotheses are added only after a statistical significance has been found) and ‘dry-labbing’ (the experiment lab exists only on paper), amongst other dirty tricks.

At research universities, it is publish or perish. Scholars “would seemingly run over the next of kin in a small jeep if it meant getting published in a ‘top’ journal” (p. 5). Due to their fetishisation, highly-ranked journals (often hidden behind paywalls and thus inaccessible to non-academics) are endowed “with near quasi-religious powers” (p. 31) and the “measure has become the target and the tail is wagging the dog” (p. 49). Multinational journal publishers have thus been placed in a position where they can extort universities to access their own outputs with outlandish subscription fees. A less well-documented practice is the publication of overpriced academic monographs. Ironically, universities pay their academics salaries, but nonetheless must then purchase their output from multinational journal and book publishers for their libraries, thus paying twice. Another irony, especially in the case of public universities, is that taxpayers do not have access to the academic output that they funded as it is hidden behind firewalls and prohibitively expensive.

The title of chapter 6, “The demise of homo academicus”, can be taken rather literally, as it discusses suicides and other deaths by students and academics as a result of ‘dark academia’. One particularly poignant example that shows the extent of the “proletarianisation of academic labour” (p. 92) in the U.S. is the death of 83-year-old adjunct professor Margaret

Vojtko who had an onerous workload, but barely earned US\$25,000 with no healthcare benefits. After she was diagnosed with cancer, her health deteriorated and she was dismissed by her ostensibly Catholic employer. Medical bills mounted, medicine and electricity ran out, and Prof Vojtko eventually died a lonely death.

Chapter 7 discusses universities' obsession with impact – defined as “scholarly activity with influence beyond the so-called ivory tower, delivering practical outcomes for business, contributing to growth and national prosperity” (p. 99). Such a definition of impact for instance precludes the studying of the stagecraft of 15th century Florentine theatre, which shows how far modern universities have moved away from the Humboldtian ideal. Impact also presents critical intellectuals with an intriguing double-bind: damned if they say something, damned if they don't. If they are not chastised for being insufficiently ‘applied’ and practical because they focus on more traditional academic activities (such as teaching and writing academic works), they may be castigated as elitists, if they speak out about political and environmental topics such as populism or global warming.

The next chapter (8) addresses the “academic star complex” (p. 113) that is rather different from 20th-century public intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis. Amusingly, Fleming distinguishes three-character types of academic stars: successful academic starlets as well as wannabe and failed starlets. These comparatively mundane starlets excel at networking and self-promotion. In Fleming's observation, when failed starlets enter middle management, they “often seek revenge and can easily become Hitler-like taskmasters” (p. 123).

Chapter 9 focuses on student hellscapes. In the U.S. and in the UK, the student debt mountain has reached “epic proportions” (p. 128). There is also a racial dimension to it, with black and brown Americans being disproportionately affected by this malaise as compared to their white counterparts. As a result of ever-increasing study fees, tertiary education has become a “borderline luxury good” (p. 132). The student debt crisis is a stressor for both students and graduates. Financial difficulties are exacerbated by socio-economic conditions. Shockingly, a 2019 survey in the UK found that “40 per cent of UK students live in flats with mould on their walls” (p. 133). The dire financial situation has led to young female college students becoming ‘sugar babies’ who offer sexual services to richer, older men (‘sugar daddies’) via dedicated websites and apps. International students are often forced into semi-legal, exploitative work arrangements that in extreme cases, can amount to modern slavery.

At the same time, an unsavoury flipside of the edu-factory is the rise of ‘essay mills’ that offer contract cheating – a serious matter where apparently, serious money can be made, with one China-based essay writer earning US\$150,000 a year. Nonetheless, I could barely stop laughing when Fleming cited EssayShark.com's ‘gig economy’ business model to match ‘customers’ and writers:

“First, our writers check instructions and deadlines of orders and place their bids in accordance with the complexity and the urgency of particular orders, The system

automatically adds a service fee and the total price is displayed to the customer. Then the customer is able to compare all of the bids, as well as get acquainted with each writer's level of cooperation and writing skills by watching him or her start working on the order. This way, a customer can settle for a particular writer whose approach to work and bid requested is most suitable for his or her needs" (cited in Fleming, 2021, p. 139).

In the final chapter 10, "How universities die", Fleming discusses ten symptoms of what he perceives as the terminal decline of universities. My favourite is symptom 7: "Over time academic metrics end up measuring only one thing. The extent of their own reification" (p. 153). Apart from yearning for Derrida's utopian vision of a university "sans condition" with a no-strings-attached funding structure, what can the critical pedagogue in the employ of a university do about the crisis of higher education? Fleming regards Harney & Moten's (2013) call for decolonisation from the inside out as more realistic than Derrida's utopia. Their aim is to arrive at a new conception of scholarship and pedagogy in the undercommons. The difficult-to-capture concept of the undercommons does not refer to a physical place, but to the relationships between people who have been excluded and denied resources. In Harney and Moten's analysis, the university becomes a place of refuge and a source of resources for critical projects in which academics problematise the university as well as themselves.

Fleming suggests that the positions of Derrida and Harney & Moten should not be regarded as binaries. But despite these more hope-inspiring options, Fleming remains "pessimistic" (p. 165) and appears to tell us (to cite the title of another recent book by him) that The worst is yet to come (Fleming, 2018). The last two sentences from his book explain his pessimism:

"But the institutional field is overdetermined and formidably delimited by the state first, the market and economic matrix second and the corporate industrial-complex third, which increasingly define the macro-rules of the game we must play. As it circles the drain, this tripartite has gripped society even more decisively – including higher education – and now threatens to drag us down with it into a dark new beginning" (p. 165).

There are many things to like about Fleming's brilliant and important book. While there is an understandable focus on the Anglo-Saxon sphere, with many excellent examples from Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the U.S, Fleming refreshingly also provides great examples from additional countries. Perhaps there is even an opportunity for Fleming to edit a volume on dark academia by inviting global authors on the topic? While Fleming's hyperbole can be extremely entertaining, he sometimes goes slightly over the top, for instance, when he makes comparisons between the managerialism found in contemporary universities and Stalin or Hitler. However, Fleming also appropriately notes that academic work, when compared with repetitive factory work, is "still a walk among the tulips" (p. 157).

Dark academia, like some of Professor Peter Fleming's other books, is a relatively thin book that can be read in a day or two. The numerous endnotes demonstrate his academic rigour (and they are worthwhile to refer to). Consequently, the main text is not burdened with references and instead imbued with surprisingly great entertainment value. This would appear

to be an ideal combination for a book like this, hopefully not only attracting academic readers, but also students and other members of the general public (who will most likely skip the endnotes). *Dark academia* is an outstanding book that would make for thoroughly depressing reading, if not for the author's black humour that occasionally transforms dark academia into dark comedy. Fleming has a rare gift for writing that, at least in my case, made the book as unputdownable as a whodunnit. I had previously read Cederström and Fleming's *Dead Man Working* (2012) – in which it is argued that corporations have colonised life itself and the experience of work is that of a living death with compulsive feigning of enthusiasm. After reading *Dark academia*, I look forward to exploring Fleming's oeuvre further. Amongst others, *The mythology of work* (2015), *The death of homo economicus* (2017) and *Sugar daddy capitalism* (2018a) await.

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