

Symposia Abstract Book - Main Abstract Book with Submissions and Programme (All Symposia)

Universities and unicorns: the role of assetisation and rentiership in the construction of higher education digital futures (0383)

Contributors: Janja Komljenovic, Sam Sellar, Morten Hansen, Javier Mármol Queraltó

Chair: [Janja Komljenovic](#)¹

Discussant:

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Rationale Text: Universities worldwide are increasingly digitalising their operations, with the current COVID-19 pandemic speeding up otherwise steady developments. Digitalisation is largely driven by proprietary digital products and services developed and offered by for-profit companies that constitute the education technology (EdTech) industry. This industry is part of the digital economy more broadly and employs financial strategies that focus on turning things into assets, instead of entrepreneurial strategies based on commodity production. The study of higher education (HE) markets has so far focused on service-commodities. However, data and data products do not act like commodities. Commodities are consumed once used, but data is reproducible at almost zero marginal cost. New products and services can be created from data and monetised through subscription fees, an app, or a platform that does not transfer ownership, control, or reproduction rights to the user. Furthermore, data use creates yet more data, and the network effects increase the value of these platforms. Therefore, there is a new quality at play in the monetisation and marketisation of these digital HE products and services: 'assetisation'. We are witnessing a widespread change from creating value via market exchange towards value construction via the ownership and control of assets. In this symposium, we will present some of the first insights from the ESRC-funded project "Universities and Unicorns: building digital assets in the higher education industry" (UU). This research project aims to investigate new processes of value creation in the digital HE sector by introducing a focus on assets and economic rents. The assetisation of HE is consequential because of the legal and technical implications for its regulation. It is also crucial to examine in any discussion about the legitimate and socially just arrangement and distribution of assets, their ownership, and their uses. The four papers will present insights from the qualitative and quantitative analyses of investment trends in EdTech. Quantitative mapping will provide a macro view including overall investment trends in HE EdTech, geopolitical financial flows and power relations, the extent of data-enabled technology, and privatisation of innovation via patents. Qualitative analysis will present the discursive construction of the future of EdTech and how the politics of expectations encourages investors to invest in particular kinds of technologies. Furthermore, we will present our work in progress from case study research looking into universities and EdTech companies and how they assetise and create value from the digital data in the sector.

|Linked Submissions:

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Universities and unicorns: how are (education) technology companies making digital data valuable (0378)

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|**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

|**Paper Abstract:** <script id="th-iframe-script" src="chrome-extension://ofdopmlmgifpfkijadehmfjccbefaeec/assets/comms/commsiframe.js"></script> <p>This talk focuses on education technology (edtech) companies working in the higher education sector and the value of digital data. New digital economies and platform business models have changed patterns of control and ownership over user-generated data. While activities in the data brokering industries have increased, users are not positioned as owners (and thus potential sellers) of their data. Instead, firms have enhanced their analytical abilities to turn data into insights, and associated business-to-business data markets have emerged as a result. As universities increasingly digitalise their operations via proprietary platforms, they also collect more personal data from students and staff. Legally, universities are data controllers but they may allow third parties to process their data and engage in other contractual data relations. This talk will present the work in progress from the UU project and address who is able to make university-related personal data valuable, how, and in what form.

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Universities and Unicorns: Mapping Financial Investment Flows in Higher Education Technology (0385)

|Janja Komljenovic¹

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|**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

|**Paper Abstract:** Investment in education technology (edtech) has witnessed unprecedented growth and reached a record high during the current pandemic. Market intelligence providers such as HolonIQ show that most edtech investment happens in China and the US by large, with India catching up. Other regions, including the EU, lag behind. Moreover, most investment is directed towards lifelong learning and individuals and less towards schools and universities. This talk will present insights from quantitative mapping by the project "Universities and Unicorns: building digital assets in the higher education industry" (UU). A new classification of HE investment will be presented, focusing on the primary function, primary customer and end-users. One of the key elements of the new classification is to differentiate between intensive and extensive digitalisation. Our analysis reveals different trends than presented by the commercial market intelligence providers

with different geo-political relations, as well as lower levels of data-driven innovation.

Universities and Unicorns: Investigating the Digital Transformation of Higher Education in the UK (0466)

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Paper Abstract: This paper reports initial findings from university case studies conducted as part of the *Universities and Unicorns: Building digital assets in the higher education industry* project. Case studies are being conducted with four universities: one Russell Group university, one research-intensive university and two post-92 universities. In each case, we are interviewing senior leaders, academic staff, directors of IT departments, IT developers and staff working in commercialization and legal departments. We are also collecting documents relating to digital strategy, business and data management plans, technical reports, financial records, and contracts with EdTech companies. Initial findings from the case studies focus on four main areas: (1) digital strategy, (2) partnership and procurement, (3) the value of data; and (4) emerging assetization. Through detailed discussion of these early findings, we examine how the development and use of digital platforms provided by EdTech companies is transforming higher education in the UK.

Universities and 'Unicorns': A Critical Analysis of Investors' Discourse of the Rise of Educational Technologies Within the COVID-19 Pandemic Context (0613)

Javier Mármol Queraltó¹

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Paper Abstract: Within the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, EdTech investors are scaffolding new digital markets in HE, reshaping the conceptualization of universities, HE and the sector itself more generally (Williamson 2021). This investigation is primarily qualitative and focuses on the subtle discursive nuances brought about by alternative linguistic configurations in the reshaping of the HE sector. These are examined operationalizing a cognitive-linguistic approach to Critical Discourse Studies (CL-CDS; Hart 2020) with a focus on Conceptual Metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and event-construal in terms of force-dynamics (Talmy 2000). The data examined includes investment theses and manifestos, interviews with EdTech professionals and investors, financial prediction charts and fund announcements. Our findings reveal that a small number of Conceptual

Metaphors serve to underpin the ideological foundations for the acceleration of digitalization processes of HE, along with the formulation of push and pull factors affecting the sector in terms of force-dynamics. These findings broadly reflect a neoliberal logic, and also inform of the subtle transition towards models of assetization (Komljenovic 2020, 2021) in the HE sector.
