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

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Abstract: This paper reports initial findings from university case studies conducted as part of the *Universities and Unicorns: Building digital assests 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.

Paper: Universities are digitalising their operations with the support of the education technology (EdTech) sector, which is undergoing unprecedented growth. The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a catalyst for digitalisation of education and has accelerated developments in HE digitalisation by five to ten years according to one estimate (Pyshkin & Gifford 2020). EdTech is embedded in the global digital economy, which is driven by business models focused on data-driven products and services. The digital economy is creating assets and generating value through economic rents (e.g. subscriptions to digital platforms). The term assetization refers to the creation of things (e.g. digital platforms, data, IP) that can be owned, controlled, traded and monetized as a revenue stream (Birch & Muniesa 2020). An asset can be bought and sold, but their primary function is to generate an economic rent through ownership and control of the asset, rather than selling it to a new owner (Birch & Muniesa 2020). We want to understand what kind of digital assets are being created in the higher education industry and what effect they have on university operations. We are interested in the synergies and tensions between investors, private companies, and universities as they work together to construct future value in the higher education industry.

While many studies evaluate education technologies in the context of teaching and learning, these case studies focus on relations between public universities and EdTech companies, particularly the assetization of data generated through the use of proprietary digital platforms. In the second phase of our project, we are conducting qualitative case studies with four UK universities: one Russell Group university, one research-intensive university and two post-92 universities. Comparative analysis is being undertaken within cases and between cases, both and horizontally and vertically

(Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016). The case studies focus on what kind of digital assets are being built in HE, by whom, and for whose gain. In each case study, 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.

Some universities have explicit *digital strategies* and are seeking to position the university as sector leaders, while in other cases digital strategy is not documented. In some cases, digital strategy is driven by teaching and research strategy, effectively serving as a means to implement the latter, rather than shaping teaching and research strategy. Universities appear to be developing digital ecosystems by joining up platforms and focusing on the interoperability of their systems.

Partnerships with EdTech companies are driven by strategic and pragmatic purposes. In some cases, these partnerships contribute to explicit strategies for enhancing the university's reputation as a digital leader. In other cases, partnerships are determined by existing systems or specific requirements that can only be met by a limited number of providers. *Procurement* decisions are shaped by technical concerns such as the affordances of application programming interfaces (APIs).

One primary *value of data* for universities is reputational. Universities are pursuing approaches to collect, analyse and use data to improve teaching, learning and student experience, linked to key performance indicators and the representation of the university in the HE market. In a number of cases there is clearly more potential for universities to make use of digital data for this purpose. At this stage in our study, we have not identified assetization of data by universities.

Universities have expressed concerns about the *assetization of data* by commercial partners. In some cases, universities actively pursue access to data generated by their use of digital platforms in their contractual negotiations. However, these universities do not have access to aggregated data collected by commercial partners through the use of these platforms by other universities. Concerns have been expressed about the use of aggregated data sets to develop new products and services that automate aspects of academic work (e.g. assessment).

Through detailed discussion of these early findings, we examine how the development and use of digital platforms provided by EdTech companies is the transforming of higher education in the UK.

References: