Enacting academic freedom in the neoliberal university

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Abstract

When higher education across Africa rid itself of colonial forces, it had the potential to become a common good, in service of wider society and the environment. But it has largely missed this opportunity by narrowing itself to a neoliberal framing of skills training and credentialling for industry. This article maps out the various ways in which university practices and processes serve neoliberal ideologies at the cost of serving people and the planet. For higher education to assert itself as a common good, it needs to enact its academic freedoms. This will require critical responses to both the state and the market as the academy steers the academic project towards its social and environmental responsibilities.

Introduction

As the world tumbles into a revival of fascism, hard-fought academic freedoms are once again in peril. Whether it be the censorship of history education in US colleges (Sachs & Young 2024), the placement of presidential appointments in universities in Turkey (Yackly 2021), or the ethnic and religious biases that plague Nigerian universities (Akanbi 2025), academic freedoms cannot be taken for granted. While incursions on academic freedom can come from many sources, I argue that a significant threat comes from inside our own university structures. The neoliberal framing of today's university limits its possibilities to act as a common good.

Formal education was a significant tool of suppression in the imperialists' war chest. Across the colonised countries in Africa, education served three key purposes: it ensured a literate population for the administration of the colony; it spread the dominant religion of the relevant colonial power; and it served to ensure domination over indigenous populations, through the suppression or complete erasure of their languages and knowledges.

The waves of independence of countries across the continent brought an opportunity for higher education to serve quite a different set of purposes. Instead of acting as a public bad, developed at least in part to ensure colonists' supremacy and subjugation of indigenous populations, it became possible to frame higher education as a social structure that serves the public good[1].

Higher Education as a common good

A university education has always been associated with status as a private good. Its earlier incarnations were only accessible to men from elite families, whose standing in society was partly cemented through their education. But over time, and fairly rapidly since WWII, higher education became massified and open to people from all social strata (Trow 1973). At this point higher education became positioned as a means of social mobility. Attaining a university qualification allowed the recipient to access better employment and higher wages.

It is increasingly seen to do this by offering access to a set of 'workplace skills' which are discursively positioned as neutral, utilitarian "market commodities" and divorced from "the minds, bodies and hands of those who exercise them and the social contexts in which they are deployed" (Rosenblad & Wheelahan 2025, p.1). Higher education thus became an explicit, individual, private good. While these economic private goods of higher education are often articulated in marketing by the sector, the private bads are less commonly placed under the spotlight. Where higher education leaves students with a sense of failure or alienation, crippled by debt and often empty-handed having been excluded from the institution, this is indeed a private bad.

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[1] Calls for higher education to become a common good should thus never be seen to be a call for a return to a fictional golden age, rather it is a vision for the future.

Many argue that seeing the private good benefits of higher education only in narrow economic terms undermines the potential for higher education to enable personal transformation. As Ashwin states, the educational purpose of a *higher* education is to "bring students into a transformational relationship with knowledge that changes their sense of who they are and what they can do in the world" (2020: 3). This entails an empowerment of the individual such that they can see the world in new ways. Importantly, this richer understanding of the private good benefits of higher education rejects the idea of higher education simply enabling the individual to participate more fully in crass consumerism, rather it entails nurturing in students a deep sense of social responsibility and accountability.

In regards higher education as a *public* good[2], this means that it should serve all of society to have a higher education sector (see Singh 2008; Badat 2011; Naidoo 2010; Nussbaum 1999). That is, it should be in the general interests of people and the planet to have universities as a key social structure, alongside, for example, hospitals and fire stations.

The Kampala Declaration on Academic Freedom of 1990 spelled out the ways in which higher education should be a social structure serving the public good. While the most frequently quoted extracts from the Kampala Declaration pertain to the rights of individuals and institutions to enjoy freedom from state interference, just as important are those aspects of the declaration that remind us of our "social responsibility as intellectuals." Article 20 tells us that it is not just a right but a "responsibility to promote the spirit of tolerance towards different views and positions and enhance democratic debate and discussion." And Article 22 spells out that this encompasses more than responsibility to those who work and study in the university and includes the struggle for rights and emancipation for all.

Where universities take up such responsibilities spelled out in the Kampala Declaration, we can indeed see that they are a public good. This is not a simple matter of universities doing the 'right thing'. Being a genuine public good can at times entail refusing to take on a populist or politically simple position, and rather being willing to speak truth to power. The public good university recognises its place of privilege as a space of knowledge creation and dissemination, but it strives to create and disseminate knowledge in service of people and the planet, without fear or favour. This is more vital now than ever.

Climate change threatens the planet, nuclear war seems once again a possibility, increasing divides between rich and poor, and the decline of democratic structures all mean we have to once again start "thinking about the unthinkable" as Kahn warned back in 1962. But thinking about the unthinkable can leave us in a state of paralysis and fear. Nurturing a sense of agency and possibility becomes a more pressing role for higher education than ever before (Rosenblad & Wheelahan 2025).

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[2] There is much literature as to who the 'publics' are in the notion of the 'public good'. Some researchers argue that the term 'common good' is better because it includes the environment with its sense of a shared commons. And it points to the notion that at times what is good for the commons, might be at odds with the interests of some individuals or parties (Singh 2008; Nussbaum 1999).

As Giroux points out, "threats to democracy, if not humanity itself, must be addressed, in part, through the crucial recognition that education is a fundamental element of mass social change. It is not an exaggeration to state that education has become the great civil rights issue of our era" (2025: 3). Becoming a social structure dedicated to serving the common good was a clear goal for many universities in post-independence Africa. The extent to which these goals have been achieved has unfortunately been greatly constrained by the university sector's embrace of neoliberalism.

The neoliberal academy

Neoliberalism is a term much used and seldom defined (Aalbers 2013; Venugopal 2015). I have argued elsewhere that the most succinct way to define neoliberalism is the financialisation of everything, including all we do, think, and produce, so that 'value' pertains only to monetisation (McKenna 2024, 2022a, 2022b, 2021; Boughey & McKenna 2021). While neoliberalism is closely associated with the free-market and 'trickle down economics' (*sic*), we should bear in mind that it can exist as both an ideology and political strategy even in countries, such as Erdoğan's Turkey, which rely heavily on state power and nonmarket instruments and yet invoke cost-benefit language in neoliberal ways (Madra & Adaman 2018). The effects of neoliberalism are felt everywhere albeit in different ways.

Neoliberalism includes a strong narrative of investment in human capital (Houghton 2019), which positions higher education as a means of skills training for individual wealth and national economic growth. This has the potential to strip higher education's focus on powerful knowledge and social and environmental responsibility. Neoliberalism's reliance on 'debt-fuelled consumption' (Houghton 2019) has benefitted the sector as students take out loans to pay for access to the qualifications higher education offers because of the promised access to individual wealth. Similarly, the neoliberal shift from seeing society as collectives of people to seeing it as a collection of consumers (Sayer 2014, Houghton 2019) has had the effect of positioning students as customers who have paid for the 'product' of a qualification. It also positions them as commodities who, as future 'human capital' serve the knowledge economy.

Despite promises of efficiency and economic growth, neoliberalism has led to widening inequalities (Giroux 2025). Around the world we see "growing inequalities of wealth and opportunity; injustices of class and caste; economic exploitation; corruption and money and privilege occluding the arteries of democracy" (Judt 2011, p47). Instead of challenging such realities, the university sector has quietly acquiesced to it. In part this is because when students see higher education as a place for the accreditation that will offer them social mobility and when the state sees universities as a means of driving economic growth, the sector's financial stability is more likely. It is in this context that responsibility and a belief in truth need to be foregrounded in the shaping of identity, agency and politics. The academy has a significant potential to contribute to such a shift.

Neoliberal practices in the academy

Resisting neoliberalism and moving towards the university as a common good will require us to invoke our academic freedoms. But to do this, we need to move away from the sense that neoliberalism is some nebulous entity that resists identification. Instead, we need to directly point to instances where current university processes and practices are neoliberal in nature. We cannot change what we cannot name. Here follow just a few examples of the neoliberal framing of today's universities.

The Rise of Managerialism

Managerialism emerged largely in response to the incursion of New Public Management whereby the metrics and monitoring that had been implemented in industry were brought into the public sector, including into higher education. These were assumed to enable efficiencies, despite little evidence of them doing so in the private sector and much evidence of them instilling fear and mistrust (see, for example, Newfield 2016; Shore 2010; Shore & Wright 2015).

Managerialism has been seen to strip the professional identities of academics and others working in the university, who are now instructed to follow clear sets of rules and procedures and are punished should they fail to adhere to them (Thaver 2010). Ironically, working in a university that is premised on adherence to rules, rather than on nurturing the academic project, often leads to a 'work-to-rule' mindset with academics being loathe to commit to anything that is not explicitly required in their job description (Maistry 2012).

Examples of managerialism abound in the neoliberal institution and include the rapid rise in Executive Management. The number of Deputy Vice-Chancellors has increased alongside the formation of new positions such as Executive Directors of Institutional Planning, Quality Assurance, and so on. It is also now common for deans to be Executive Deans, appointed by management to implement their institutional processes down into the faculty rather than appointed by faculty to represent their interests up to management (McKenna 2020).

Executive Management are usually only appointed on a short term contract and they have to deliver on performance management items if such contracts are to be renewed. This means they may be more likely to coerce those who report to them and suppress dissent rather than to nurture any shared commitment to the public good. Maistry argues that "the ingenuity of temporality is that the perpetrators do not remain on long enough to witness the long-term damage that is the product of their acts" (2012: 521).

The salaries of executive positions reflect their status and are substantially higher than that of a full professor (Mintz 2021). Such salaries are deemed appropriate given the amount of responsibility and level of decision making the incumbents of these posts are expected to take on. And this is part of the problem with managerialism, the centralisation of power in this ever expanding Executive Management has the effect of a concomitant reduction of power elsewhere in the academy.

Power in a collegial institution focused on acting as a common good is arguably decentralised and jointly borne. However, the rise of managerialism has seen Senates and Faculty Boards reduced to spaces of rubber-stamping. Universities often battle to get quorum at such meetings because disenchanted academics do not see the value in their presence in these spaces. Senate agendas are often crafted behind closed doors, few attendees prepare for these meeting by reading the documents that are tabled, and there is little deliberation of substantial issues. Petty politics often emerge and deliberations about the wording of Minutes often take longer than discussions about the student experience, the relationship between the university and the state, the role of the university within its community, or any other of the many pressing issues that confront today's institutions.

Academics are thus not the innocent victims of managerialism but are often complicit in its functioning. For example, the focus on the use of titles and the insistence on the formalities of tradition as everyone jostles to claim their small power in this competitive and hierarchical space does enormous harm. Insisting on being called 'Professor' or being deferred to on issues outside of their domain of research expertise has the effect of silencing younger and more provocative voices and undermines the potential for the academy to model a democratic space.

As managerialism takes hold, so academia becomes a far less desirable workplace for those committed to the academic project in service of the common good (Waitere et al. 2011). The increase in posts required to manage the instrumental rationality of the neoliberal university also includes a proliferation of posts in areas beyond the Executive Management, such as Human Resources. Academics now make up less than 50% of staff and less than 30% in some universities in South Africa (CHE 2023).

Academics feel that they are positioned as 'resources' for the university rather than as individuals with expertise and a deep commitment to the academic project. This is exacerbated by the rise of precarity in university employment (Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo 2024; Makama & Peters 2024). In South Africa, 62% of academics only have temporary employment (CHE 2023), with all the implications for quality and commitment to the academic project that entails. It is especially challenging for those working on contract to use their academic freedoms to fight back against neoliberal processes constraining the common good. Precarious employment breeds compliance.

Measurement and monitoring

The idea that measuring and monitoring activities will increase performance has been repeatedly disputed (see Shore and Wright 2024 for a detailed history), but nonetheless such activities dominate in the neoliberal academy. Key performance indicators are attached to each job, often without the nuance and flexibility formally associated with academic work (Mintz 2021). This has the consequence of deskilling academic work, which becomes simply a set of generic tasks (Schapper & Mayson 2005). Items such as 'teach undergraduate class' and 'annual publication outputs' are far more complex and differentiated than any performance management system allows. It is possible to teach with or without pedagogical preparation, with or without the design of engaging tasks,

with or without the labour-intensive provision of formative feedback, and with or without care and compassion. It is possible to achieve annual publication outputs with or without quality, with or without impact, with or without a commitment to making a knowledge contribution.

Several unintended consequences have thus emerged in response to such metrification of the academy, such as publishing in predatory publications which are never read nor cited (Mouton & Valentine, 2017), or teaching to the test and reducing the intellectual challenge in courses where student evaluations determine the renewal of an academic's contract. By focusing only on the ends, performance management ignores why academia is the home to activities such as teaching and research in the first place. Unfortunately, alongside the consequences of deskilling academic work and demoralizing the workforce, managerialism has also increased workloads because of its focus on measuring and monitoring. Capturing outputs and reporting on performance all take time and so the instrumental rationality of the neoliberal university means a great deal more administrative processes must be followed (Shore & Wright 2024).

Performance management systems focus on what is "calculable rather than memorable" (Ball, 2012: 17), driving compliance to mediocrity and undermining the creative risk-taking typically associated with knowledge creation. Drucker is frequently misquoted as saying "What gets measured gets done" but then the flipside of the saying is ignored: that what is not measured is not done. And a great many aspects of any university focused on the common good are simply not measurable. There is much that should count deeply in a public good university that is simply not countable.

The correct version of Drucker's quote is very telling: "What gets measured gets managed". In saying this he not only signalled the power of measurements but also the limits of management. The focus on managing people (especially through monitoring) rather than empowering them and ensuring commitment to a shared set of goals is a key characteristic of the neoliberal university. And sadly the logic of "efficiency through metrics" produces a "spiralling regress of trust" (Shore & Wright 2024:6).

A major aspect of such metrification has been the emergence of the billion-dollar rankings industry, which many African universities aspire to, even while acknowledging that the methods used are scientifically dubious and neocolonial in effect (Fonn 2024; Gadd 2020; Hazelkorn 2017). "When the international standing of universities is turned into a performance indicator, ... this has effects across three scales: the whole sector is reorganized in pursuit of competitive advantage; each organization is repurposed around the targets and incentives; and every individual is impelled to concentrate on 'what counts'" (Shore & Wright 2024:19).

These are but a few examples of the extent to which everyday practices in the academy are neoliberal in nature. If we are to collectively focus on the possibilities of the university as a common good, we need to explicitly and actively draw on our academic freedom rights and responsibilities to point out the dangers inherent in such everyday practices.

Building a higher education for the common good

Higher education needs to serve not just the economy or the state or the individual; it needs to serve all people and the planet. We need to develop concrete visions of how the university can be a social structure committed to knowledge creation and dissemination for all. The time for building and acting on such visions of the African university is now, given the enormous geo-political fault lines at play. As neoliberalism's failure to "fulfill its guarantees of social mobility and a fair level of economic equality" become evident, so it has "morphed into a rebranded form of fascism" (Giroux 2025, p.3). The university held captive to neoliberal ideologies will not be able to withstand the forces of fascism.

Compassion, empathy, and kindness are already becoming political acts, so we need to be deliberate in our agenda and bold in our actions. To achieve this will take both coordinated and separate activities. We need to build spaces to regularly interrogate what we see as the purposes of higher education and to imagine what our everyday practices would look like if we were to achieve these purposes. In short, we need to conceptualise what a good university looks like (Connell 2022).

There is much in the Kampala Declaration that can help us in this endeavour:

* The symposium called for the transformation of administrative structures, procedures and practices in academic institutions to make these more representative of and accountable to teachers, researchers, students and others working within them.

* The symposium called for the promotion of participatory and democratic methods of teaching, research and publishing, and high professional and ethical standards.

* The symposium called upon African academic institutions to promote intellectual exchanges among African scholars, provide sanctuary to exiled scholars, and to offer all African academics equal terms of service, remuneration and treatment regardless of nationality.

* The symposium called upon African intellectuals to develop solidarity and supportive networks to defend the collective interests of the intellectual community.

Through all of these, we can build a higher education sector for the African continent. This will not be without resistance and it will not be easy in an age "governed by market-mania, excessive self-interest, unattached individualism, and short term goals" (Giroux 2025). But it is possible. It requires us to reject passive compliance and instead to bravely enact every one of our academic freedoms for the common good.

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