

This Is How Universities Die...

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. One of the biggest Covid-19 casualties, globally, has been education. But something that many have missed during the pandemic is that the higher education crisis is being ruthlessly exploited. Management teams and consultants think that they can now, without all that pesky academic consultation, make megabucks by cementing a fully neoliberal educational regime.

Ross Peter Fleming, welcome to Renegade Inc. Thank you very much for joining us.

Peter Fleming Wonderful to be with you. Thank you very much for the invitation.

Ross Peter, one thing we can all agree on, Covid-19, the pandemic. It has had a massive effect on education, not just education in schools, but also academia. Give us a snapshot into your view of how you think that this pandemic has affected academia in general.

Peter Fleming It's been a huge jolt to the higher education system. There's no doubt about that. And, you know, we've seen some really nasty developments in universities regarding the way in which academics have been treated, students have been treated and so forth. And I'm of the opinion that things were already quite bad anyway. And this has kind of brought out the cracks and fissures that have been there for a long time in universities, particularly the public ones. And it's amplified certain dynamics like managerialism and this kind of economization, if you like, of universities. It's brought that out and extended those logics in quite a stark way. So it's been a real difficult period, I think and universities are very uncertain. And I think the uncertainty stretches right from the bottom right to the top of universities. So who knows what's to come? I get the feeling that the worst is yet to come to be honest.

Ross You very clearly point out that neo liberalisation of universities, the neo liberal doctrine, has been a pernicious influence and ultimately been disastrous not just for students, but also for staff and wider society. Just describe to us what the neo liberalisation of university education is and why you think it's been such a disaster?

Peter Fleming Well, the neo liberalisation of universities and higher education, more generally, not only universities, but other tertiary education institutions, really kind of come from an economist's abstract view of society, one that really never worked in practice and a whole set of sectors in society. But when it come to the university, the idea was that universities should treat themselves as if they were businesses. Now, technically, most universities are charities, but treat themselves as if they were businesses and reproduce all of the kind of internal structures that a private enterprise has. And so you get hierarchies, you get managerialism, you get authority structures that have no room for dissent and academic dialogue, as we've had for many, many years prior to the liberalisation process. And of course, these universities are now in competition competing for fee paying students. So poor old students have got it hard as well because they're being burdened with student debt and they have to pay a huge amount of money now whereas, you know, the people who are initiating these policies, you know, ironically probably got their education for free. So there's a weird twist to that.

Ross You wrote a piece called Dead Teacher Working, which sort of went round the world, went viral, as we say now. It went around the world a few times and got huge amounts of traction. Within it, there's a tweet from Aaron Ansuini and he says, 'Hi, excuse me. I just found out that the prof for this online course I'm taking died in 2019 and he's technically still giving classes since he's literally my prof for this course and I'm learning from lectures recorded before his passing. It's a great class. But WHAT.... Now, this Professor Francois-Marc Gagnon, he is teaching from beyond the grave, no less. Now, is this a snapshot into what universities are doing? They own the IP, they claim, and actually they can keep pushing that out whilst taking student fees. And actually, it's now just about dissemination of information, collecting fees from the student as opposed to that intellectual quest that you were talking about?

Peter Fleming Yeah, there is a degree of IP issues around that. And, you know, boy, you know, when even you die, you don't get led off the old treadmill from the grave. And working hard, by all accounts. I'm not too sure if his bank account was seeing it in terms of a salary, however. But that's a different question.

Ross But that's perfect, isn't it? Because if you talk about the neo liberalisation, this is about rent seeking. This is about using that IP to generate more money. And both sides, students sort of win, but he certainly loses. Turns out the business, the university, wins massively.

Peter Fleming Definitely. Definitely. Except when that goes public and then it's seen what it is and it's something that's quite creepy, let's face it. And the student himself in another tweet said that he went looking for his professor's email account and instead got a memorial, you know, the little candle and so forth and said this can't be the same guy, he just gave me a lecture. But you know, it's indicative, right? It's kind of symptomatic, if you like, of what's happening in universities after the Covid-19 pandemic where, you know, there has been attempts to do this what I call learnification. There's been attempts to do this for many years. And there's been a lot of pushback for obvious reasons. But I think that the main reason is that you're treating something that is very kind of an intangible quality of a worker, as if it was just an exchangeable product and can be put on the Internet and you can make use of it as much as you like. And that the person themselves doesn't really matter. It's their output. Their output is what matters and it's been pre-recorded. So why not use it over and over and over? So what's really scary is about the logic, the management decision making behind that decision to use a deceased person's material for teaching purposes. And I can imagine that the university in question changed that policy pretty quickly after this come out and the scandal unfolded as it did.

Ross But they're not on their own, are they? Because throw a brick out of a window in any capital city or in fact, any city in the world at the moment, you'll hit someone who's doing an online course or as much so someone who's authored an online course by sort of fruit flying around, taking all these different elements and then charging people huge amounts of money for it. Is that the new business model? Because reading other bits of your work, you focus on PWC, no less coming in. And it seems to me that they, as a consultancy and very good neoliberal rent seeking organisation, if you like, are not letting this crisis go to waste. I quote from them: 'We've got to find the positive changes that have been made in response to the pandemic. What are the plans to embed these going forward?' Well, that to me says we don't

need consultation anymore. We're just going to grab hold of what is profitable and feed it to our students.

Peter Fleming Yeah, well, there is an element of that, no doubt. And that report was quite shocking, you know. This large consultancy firm went to the chief financial officers of major universities in the UK and just asked them what were the good things about the pandemic, you know? What's the bright side? What have you got now that you did not have before? And the main bright side was everything being put online practically overnight, whereas they've been trying to do this for many years because of the cost saving efficiencies that a business-like university can obtain from putting everything online. Double class sizes, for example, reduced labour costs and an extreme case, having a deceased person giving lectures from beyond the grave. And so this consultancy report was basically saying there are really good things for the university. Now, what they say is good for the university is not good for the average teaching staff and the average student. And this is really kind of symbolic of that division, right? - that division between those that are executives in the university running the university and their interests and what they want and the staff on the ground in the trenches, having to deliver classes online, endless classes online, mop up all of the problems that that causes and basically filling the institutional holes. And there are plenty of those in the university at the moment that the staff on the ground fix it because this is being pushed from a very abstract accountant's view of what a university ought to be. And that's really where the clash of values is. When it comes to financialization. I call it the financialization of academic consciousness, because now we're all walking around like accountants as well. So, you know, senior executives in universities who have been trying to treat the organisation as a corporation, as an enterprise, have been trying to convince everyone else for many, many years to do the same right down to the bottom. And no one's really bought it because of those academic values which aren't that romantic, you know. Academic values is just about debating stuff and thinking about knowledge rather than what the knowledge can do and how much money the knowledge can make. So it's nothing kind of pie in the sky. But finally with the pandemic and the crisis, you know, everyone's thinking like that now, mainly because we're afraid of losing our jobs, I guess, but also because we've seen entire institutions put in jeopardy. You know, they may sink and many will sink because of this. And so that's really kind of changed the way we think about our work. And I see it as kind of a really sad development.

Ross That threat is classic neo liberal playbook stuff, TINA, there is no alternative because what you're saying is you might lose your job. So what you have are insecure employees. That ultimately rubs off on the students. Managerial class then emanates from all that because you can control them and then you get massive salaries at the top for the so-called job creators. But let me just split it into three - so-called job creators, wage slaves and debt peons who are the students at the bottom. That is not a healthy setup, is it? And it's certainly not a learning environment. It's an environment where you go pick up points for jumping through hoops and then hopefully go on to go and do something which is financially rewarding so you can pay back that debt.

Peter Fleming Well, that's right. And that's actually a very nice way of putting it. And those three sets of groups have very different interests. And so the university is kind of in contradiction to itself with misalignment regarding each of those parties. Students have debt and they've become very instrumental and want to get the best grade they can can by ever

what means as possible. And then you've got this kind of car drag, if you like, of senior executives, many of whom aren't actually academics and see the world, you know, from their previous occupations in the military, for example, and business and industry. And so they're looking for their next job. And they're kind of trying to meet the expectations of their stakeholders, usually government decision makers and so forth. And then you've got the workforce in the middle trying to do the best they can and usually being subjected to fear tactics. You're right. But I also say in the book that to a certain extent, academics have been - well, the academic community and that's a gross generalisation, I know there's many different groups within that - but they haven't been totally kind of a total victims, if you like. They've played their own part, if you like, in this kind of creation of the neoliberal nightmare we see now in higher education, you know, buying into the incentive scheme of, you know, best publications get higher rewards and kind of looking at their career, kind of rampant careerism. I'm not saying all academics are like that, but I don't think this is simply the story of, you know, big bad managers and the victims who are academics. So there's been a little bit of agency and compromise, if you like, amongst the academic community as well. I wanted to really convey that in the book because otherwise you lose kind of touch of what's actually happened. And when we come to fight and oppose what's happening in universities, we have to look at our own role and our own stake in the neoliberal university as well. So I think it's important to get that picture in.

Ross Peter Fleming, welcome back to Renegade Inc. In that first half, we talked about how it isn't just the managerial class or the overlords who are getting the massive salaries. Actually, everybody is in it together. And there's been throughout universities complicity for everybody moving towards this financialization, towards this neo liberalisation. Friend of the show and a professor who's no longer in the academic system, Professor Steve Keen, driven out of Sydney, also leaving London because of the managerialism. Let's just hear from him quickly about what he thinks the real problem faced by professors now is.

Video clip (Steve Keen) If I go back to when I began my academic career, it was actually 1987, which was the time famous for stock market crash. And I had to take a pay cut to become an academic. I think I've had about a 25 per cent pay cut from being a middle ranking bureaucrat in the Australian government. But it was worth it. And I got the independence to work on what I wanted to do. I had to do 12 hours a week of teaching, 6 hours a week of face to face consultation. Of course, the preparation was additional time. So I was working damn hard. But I got the freedom to do what I wanted to do and research the areas I wanted to take a look at. 30 years later, I left academia because it got to the point that bureaucrats were dotting every I and crossing every T in what I had to do in research and I had to do in teaching and giving me trivial, boring tasks to get done all the time, supposedly as an example of cost cutting. Now, just one little instance of that. I didn't have a secretary, but when I became head of school at Kingston University, I had no secretary, but there were secretarial staff on the faculty office. So once a week I would go up to the faculty office, have a stack of paper which had points where I had to put my signature, which had been chosen by the very good clerical staff there, put my signature and walk out again and come back a week later for another five minute exercise. There was then a 'reform' and I call these things deforms because that's much closer to it where they sack those staff. And instead I would get an email from the central administration saying, here are some documents, please print them out, sign them, scan them and send them back to us and please provide the expenditure code. My answer was what effing expenditure code? That used to be provided by the bureaucrat

they'd sacked in the faculty office to trim and streamline the performance. Now, what it meant, the faculty looked much more efficient. Here I was as head of school three times the salary of the staff they'd sacked, and I was having to look up the bloody expenditure codes, which changed on a weekly basis and was stored in a spreadsheet. What we should be there is about both developing new ideas and encouraging research and intelligent education of the next generation. And instead it's all become performance management and performance management assessed by bureaucrats. And I don't have it in for the secretaries and so on. But what has happened is, rather than being people who sat below you in the academic hierarchy and took a work away from you, there are now people who are trying to make you more efficient, ha ha ha, from above you and you find that rather than being an assistance, they're a hindrance. And that is all gone part and parcel of this neoliberal push in universities where you now have this God vice chancellor, who was normally a failed academic sitting above you, having to go through things, what they called the research excellence framework and the teaching excellence framework, where there are point scores that then decide how the bureaucrats and the Department of Education provide funding for you. And the whole thing is a total bureaucratic circus, which is a side effect of turning it into a marketing exercise where the marketing exercise, basically sees you as a cost a cost centre to be minimised. And it's been a total destruction in the quality of university education by commercialising it.

Ross So Peter, you know the practical on the ground issues faced by lots and lots of people now in the university system, and I'm sure a lot of people working within this complex empathise with what Professor Steve Keen is saying. *Dark Academia: How Universities Die*. That's your book and it's our book of the week. Pitch it to us and tell us why we should be reading it.

Peter Fleming Well, I would hope people will read this book simply to get an understanding of what's happened in the university today and that these problems have been brewing for some time. So there's an historical element to the book. But I just really want to convey the idea that universities, often in the public mind, are considered to be these very tweed jacket smoking type institutions and they are nothing of the sort. There is a dark side to these institutions that needs to be revealed. And this story of the of the people involved needs to be told as well. So this book is trying to really kind of pull the lid, if you like, off the neoliberal university and see the dark underbelly that's involved there,

Ross *Dark Academia, How Universities Die* by Peter Fleming. It's our Book of the Week and we highly recommend it. Peter, one of the things that strikes me, reading your stuff and listening to you is that if you're going to pull the wool, as is happening now in universities - neoliberalism is formless, so it's very difficult to fight - you're going to have to hijack the language within universities. And you've flagged some of the phrases that are coming up. Just walk me through them, because they seem to me to be very corporat and very buzzwordy which always puts a red flag up - blended learning, hybrid instruction, digital scaffolding, no less, synchronous and asynchronous learning, micro credentials. And the list goes on. I won't bore our viewers with any more of them but I have no idea, I have zero clue, as to what any of those things mean. Is that deliberate?

Peter Fleming They have no meaning. They have no meaning. That's the point. No, I'm only kidding. I'm only kidding. You know, there does seem to be this plethora and this endless kind of production of these buzzwords, something that has definitely come from the business

sector and has this kind of American tone to it, I guess. And that's really infiltrated the public sector organisations as well. So blended learning is, you know, learning where we have people in the classroom and people online and different methods of learning. So it's nothing. Blended learning is a fancy word - multiple ways of teaching. Synchronous teaching is where you're teaching live and asynchronous teaching is where it's pre-recorded. So we couldn't like pre-recorded teaching. Micro credentials is where you basically just do a small certificate qualification maybe over a weekend or two rather than a three year degree. Those have been around for years as well.

Ross What's digital scaffolding?

Peter Fleming Digital scaffolding is your computer.

Ross Why don't they just write computer online learning, like learning at your computer?

Peter Fleming It doesn't sound fancy enough and, you know, these consultants have got to make their money. So, you know, they've got to come up with some nice fancy term.

Ross Look, what about - and call me a radical - but what about learning for the sake of learning?

Peter Fleming As an academic, probably the reason I wrote the book and study this stuff is simply because I hold onto that value and I try and part it to students and so forth. And, you know, probably most people in the institution hold on to that value at some point. And this is why everything's grating. This is why there's such a fissure at the heart of the university. It's like a schizophrenic institution. You know, we want to be a business. We want to economise everything. But we want knowledge for knowledge sake as well. And so you've got these two conflicting institutional logics that's really kind of creating these difficult spaces in which to work. But remember - and I don't want to harp on about neo liberalism - but remember that the very arguments of neo liberalism was to say there's no such thing as a free lunch. There always has to be money involved. Milton Friedman, Hayek and so forth all wanted to get rid of the idea that we learn for learning sake. It has to be for an instrumental reason and there has to be incentives and has to earn income. And I think that the university as a whole is really kind of imbibed that argument way, way, way too far, you know, thinking about education simply for the job market, simply for the job market. The reason you go to university, simply for the job market. Now, look, after a certain point, you want to get a job after you've done a degree. But it is purely vocational. So is all of the other stuff meaningless, you know, learning for learning sake and becoming a good citizen and and so forth and so forth? So it seems to be a real kind of war at the moment, a cultural war at the heart of the university with subjects such as Shakespearean drama, you know, it's gone. What kind of job will you get if you study that. Mediaeval poetry? No, that's gone. What type of job will you get if you study that? And the list of things that will get you a job, of course, is getting narrower and narrower and narrower to the point where a lot of things that we think ought to be studied in the universities are no longer being supported by the institution.

Ross You take us neatly into the jobs market and there's a wonderful book that sadly David Graeber is no longer with us, but also a friend of the show. And he wrote BS Jobs: The Theory. It really struck a nerve because there are so many jobs out there that are meaningless.

And that seems to be the neoliberal play that we're training people up to go and do mindless activity so people further up the chain can make more profits?

Peter Fleming Well, that's a question that goes to the heart of the role of the university and society today. You know, so it's been set up as a skiller, you know, to give skills to graduates who then go into these BS jobs, as you say, and these jobs that really kind of contain not much skill at all. And so you've got the whole problem of overqualified people stacking shelves and in supermarkets and so forth. And I think that's an important question to keep in mind regarding what the role of the university is. You know, is it simply the handmaiden of business and industry? And it's going that way. But does it do a good job, even if it is put in that role? Does it do a good job in doing that? And when it comes to employers, employers obviously want some concrete skills for the job that they've got in mind and you wouldn't want it any other way. An airline pilot needs to be able to fly a plane, et cetera, et cetera. You want somebody who has ethos, right? who has an ethos of that's been cultivated regarding ethics and regarding inquisitive values and curiosity and so forth that are really important when it comes to the culture of an organisation. And there is a danger that that large kind of part of the type of employee someone wants to hire is missing in the graduate skills that we are producing today in universities. I know that a lot of universities are really struggling with this question. You know, there's no simple answer. But I think one of the problems that has caused this is this very myopic view of what the role of the university is. It's, you know, a training centre, you know. And so if it's a training centre, you know, what does that mean for all of the things that historically make up a university that might not fit into that picture? Do we just discard all of that? And, of course, universities are saying to themselves, well, if we do that, then we're no longer quite universities, are we? And I think also it's created a kind of a division between the elite universities - the Ivy League in the US, Oxbridge in the UK - who can afford you know, they can afford to treat themselves as non-trading centre educational facilities. They don't have to go through this whole rigmarole that middle tier and lower tier universities have to go through. And so that's an interesting kind of outcome of this kind of class division in the way in which universities are stacked in relation to this ideology. So these top universities don't necessarily have to really accept the neoliberal kind of mantra of all of this, which is interesting too. Depressing as well, but interesting.

Ross Peter Fleming, author of *Dark Academia: How Universities Die*. It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you very much for your time.

Peter Fleming Thank you very much. My pleasure.