

Degrees of (Self-)Exploitation: Learning to Labour in the Neoliberal University

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Abstract Much has been written on the neoliberalization of the academy on the one hand and precarious creative labour/work in the culture industries on the other, but there has been comparatively little writing which makes explicit the intimate links between these two sociological phenomena and how they have come to complement and reinforce one another. Taking as a case study a new postgraduate MA course in Self-Publishing, this article aims to fill this gap, arguing that fundamental to learning to labour in the neoliberal university is both ready acquiescence to exploitation and further willingness to self-exploit on the part of both staff and students. Furthermore, incumbents of a profoundly unequal and managerial knowledge hierarchy benefit from the introduction of programmes which neither train students vocationally nor educate them liberally. This, in turn, threatens the autonomy within institutions of higher education while simultaneously undermining future artistic and intellectual flourishing.

In February 2014, the University of Central Lancashire in the UK proudly announced the launch of the world's first MA in Self-Publishing. On its website, the course promises to provide "all of the necessary skills you will need to be a self-published author" and "the opportunity to complete a finished copy of your book" ("Self-Publishing MA" 2015). Yet despite lingering stigma associated with a publishing practice also derogatorily known as "vanity publishing," wherein authors themselves, not publishing houses, foot the upfront costs of publishing, the news received positive coverage in mainstream general-interest periodicals such as *The Guardian*, as well as trade publications such as *The Bookseller*, which covers the publishing industry, and the *Times Higher Education*, which covers the higher education sector (see Flood 2014; Reisz 2014; Shaffi 2014). These articles pointed to the recent breakout commercial success of self-published novelists such as E. L. James (*Fifty Shades of Grey*) and Hugh Howey (*Wool*) and the rapid growth in the absolute number of self-published titles since 2007. According to course convenor Debbie Williams, they felt had identified a "gap in the market" in postgraduate taught education (Reisz 2014). Fees were set at £5000 for UK/EU students and over twice as high for international students. Aspiring authors would, in other words, pay UCLan (as the university

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bills itself on its website) for the privilege of learning how to pay for the privilege of being published.

This double exploitation would perhaps be more readily excusable if self-publishing were a reasonably viable career path. However, the data would suggest otherwise. According to the bibliographic information provider Bowker, which tracks ISBNs, 458,554 books were self-published in 2013, a 16.5% increase from 2012 (Milliot 2014b), and it would be safe to assume that the vast majority of these books and their authors do not achieve much in the way of commercial success or even name recognition. Of course, it could be argued that not all aspiring authors want to be the next E. L. James, and indeed, Williams reports applicants “wish[ing] to publish largely for family and friends, or on themes such as local history whose small niche market is unlikely to interest a mainstream commercial publisher” (Reisz 2014). Nevertheless, she also goes on record with “hopes students will go on to publish future bestsellers,” citing *one* former student—out of dozens, possibly hundreds, she had already taught—whose self-published books had made Amazon’s bestseller lists (Flood 2014).

Although much has been written on the neoliberalization of universities on the one hand and precarious labour/work in the culture industries on the other, there has been comparatively little writing which makes explicit the intimate links between these two sociological phenomena and how they have come to complement and reinforce one another. My objective in this article is to fill that gap. Drawing upon these two literatures and critically examining the case of the Self-Publishing MA to shed light upon wider issues of academic freedom in the contemporary academy, I argue that fundamental to learning to labour in neoliberal universities is both ready acquiescence to exploitation and further willingness to self-exploit. Staff are also expected to model this behaviour for their students. Indeed, I would suggest, incumbents of a profoundly unequal and managerial knowledge hierarchy do not benefit from training students either vocationally (to replace them) or educating them liberally (to see through them). They are therefore rationally motivated to reward those employees who—by themselves—are fully capable of neither, and this threatens the present integrity of institutions of higher education while simultaneously undermining future artistic and intellectual flourishing.

In the following sections of this article, I begin with an overview of the literature on neoliberal universities and cultural work respectively, exploring the connections which can be made between higher education and precarious labour in the cultural sector. I then turn to the case study of University of Central Lancashire’s MA in Self-Publishing, easily one of the most blatant, transparent attempts to marketize training in self-exploitation to postgraduate students in recent memory. I analyze the ways in which this degree solves

problems facing universities and academic staff which purport to offer vocational training for the culture industries while, at the same time, exposing their students to increased personal risk in the guise of independent entrepreneurialism. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the wider implications of this degree and ones like it for the future of creative expression and academic freedom.

Higher Education, Professional Training, and the Neoliberal Academy

To argue that universities exist for the advancement and transmission of knowledge for its own sake, or “determined inutility” in the words of Stanley Fish (2009), would be to argue for an ideal of intellectual autonomy which has never actually existed institutionally in its purest form. The medieval universities of Europe provided training in law, medicine, and theology and had an “essentially vocational and utilitarian character” (Anderson 2006, 4). Students were prepared to become their era’s equivalent of priests, doctors, teachers, lawyers, and bureaucrats. Universities were also tasked with their own institutional reproduction, the education of future university educators. Over five-hundred years ago, universities were, in other words, specializing in the education of professionalized public servants.

Thus, while universities certainly were communities of learning, those communities existed in a symbiotic relationship with the two other most important institutions of the period, the church and the state (Anderson 2006). Church and state provided financial and material support to universities, while universities provided church and state with expertise. Although the relative power of organized religion has waned in Europe and the Americas, similar symbiotic relations with the modern nation-state are still very much in evidence in the twenty-first century. It goes practically without saying that universities still dominate, monopolize even, the training of educational, medical, and legal practitioners. Moreover, the quality of the university system and particular components, such as research excellence and training in fields such as STEM and foreign languages, continues to be linked to the maintenance and advancement of state power, or “global competitiveness” in the most current jargon.¹

The most recent, rapid expansion of higher education and research provision within universities occurred in the decades immediately following World War II (Anderson 2006; Graham and Diamond 1997). This is epitomized, for example, by the Robbins Report of 1963 in the United Kingdom, which guaranteed higher education to all with the ability and motivation to pursue it (Anderson 2006) and the so-called Golden Age of higher education in the United

States from 1945 to 1975, which was driven by high birth rates, rapid economic growth, and Cold War anxiety (Menand 2010). As Anderson (2006) notes, the expansion of higher education was an expression of the welfare state, with access to universities no longer a function of wealth or social position but rather a right of citizenship, extended to all, for the greater social good. For this reason, there was pressure on education in the traditional public service professions, such as law and medicine, dating back the medieval period, to become shorter and more highly specialized first degree subjects. This stands in marked contrast to the American model, which in response to increased state pressure on universities to widen access to specialized vocational training and applied research expertise back in the nineteenth century, had begun to mandate a first degree in the liberal arts, providing the deliberative abilities for full participation in a democratic society, and an additional postgraduate degree in order to practice in legal, medical, and indeed higher education professions (Menand 2010). While originally an attempt to preserve the exclusivity of universities, it had the effect, in the postwar period, of rapidly bolstering demand for humanistic, liberal arts education and the expansion of a professionalized professoriate (like Stanley Fish) committed to a disinterested pursuit of apolitical knowledge.

The end of this mid-century “Golden Age” came in the late 1970s and 1980s with the advent of neoliberal ideology and the resultant importance placed on individual actors and structural quality ensured through competition in the marketplace. Direct state funding was progressively withdrawn, and universities were compelled to seek alternative means to fund core activities such as research and teaching. This has resulted in three interrelated phenomena, much discussed in the literature: 1) the rise of the corporate university run on autocratic, business-minded principles of profit and loss (e.g. Bok 2003; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Tuchman 2009), 2) the degradation of working conditions and so-called “academic freedom” for university educators (e.g. Bousquet 2008; Donoghue 2008; Gerber 2014; Ginsberg 2011), and finally 3) the individualization of risk and reward for university students and their commodification as a resource. The first and second of these require no further explanation here, but the third, for reasons which will become apparent, is worth developing. Effects upon students, spurred on not just by the spirit of the times but quite directly by universities’ dependence on rising tuition fees and the assumption of lifelong student debt (Collinge 2009; Williams 2014), has *not*, I would argue, made the university vocationally-oriented—as has been shown the university has always been vocationally-oriented to some extent—but rather to turn professional training and certification from a contribution to the greater public good,

however defined, into a private commodity for personal benefit and economic advancement. Students become “customers,” and universities, as service-providers in a marketized system, must provide value in kind (even as they take in more money than they spend). As Jeffrey Williams (2014, 127) puts it: “Loans are a personal investment in one’s market potential rather than a public investment in one’s social potential; like a business, each individual is a store of human capital, and higher education provides value added.”

The irony, of course, is that loans, while instilling a neoliberal, capitalist subjectivity oriented toward the market, also place constraints upon opportunity. Jeffrey Williams (2014, 139) likens this to indentured servitude, a “bond” on students future labour and life, and argues that debt has its own unspoken pedagogy. It teaches, for example, that specialization in fields which offer good remuneration is a wise choice. Students anticipating having to pay off student loan debt should not spend their time in university “wait[ing] tables while writing a novel” (Williams 2014, 129). The spectre of debt, he likewise asserts, “rules out culture industries such as publishing or theatre or art galleries that pay notoriously little” (Williams 2014, 129-130). I will return later in this article to the issue of how much new entrants into the book publishing field might expect to make, but for now it is enough to simply underscore Jeffrey Williams’ point taken to its logical conclusion: Some degrees, from the perspective of future career prospects, may be deemed good investments for students—spending money in order to make money down the line, as it were—but others may be better viewed as an experiential form of conspicuous consumption. In such a light, reading for a degree in English Literature is more like a luxury tropical holiday than a good business decision; while it might be one of the best times of one’s life, it would not be expected to provide future financial return. The sort of degrees which would funnel students into the culture industries are an example. This sort of work cannot be expected to pay well—and reasonably well-informed students as well as academics and their university employers ought to be aware of that. What else can be said about it? I explore this question in the next section.

Cultural Work and Self-Exploitation

Sociologically and historically, it would not be possible to draw a clear, bright line between the higher education and cultural sectors, and in many specific institutional cases, such as art museums, public libraries, and university presses, to name just a few, they overlap in various and complicated ideological and organizational ways. Both sectors, for example, find their traditional valuations of knowledge and creative expression in tension with the accumulative logic

of capitalism. Especially worth noting is that this is the case historically even for Anglo-American trade book publishing companies, which have been privatized and notionally for-profit for over a hundred years (Thompson 2010). Publishers routinely cross-subsidize books they deem to have artistic value with more mainstream, commercially viable projects; if motivated purely by economic profit maximization, they would not bother with such activities (Thompson 2005; Thompson 2010). Additionally, labour in both sectors is interpenetrated with a rhetoric of “doing what you love”...for very little, or no, money” (Tokumitsu 2014). Like universities, in short, the culture industries’ position in the marketplace is a profoundly ambivalent one.

Despite these basic similarities, recent scholarly literature does not typically include higher education in amongst the culture industries. This terminology, coined by Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) in their seminal essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” is usually thought to encompass fields such as art, fashion, film, literature, magazines, music, and videogames. Hollywood but not Harvard, in other words. However, this distinction becomes increasingly difficult to cognitively sustain in a the twenty-first century where, for instance, multinational publishing corporations such as Pearson have founded their own for-profit institutions of higher education (Brienza 2015). Of particular salience for my purposes here is the scholarship on contemporary conditions of work in the culture industries (e.g. Banks, et al. 2013; Deuze 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; McRobbie 2014; Taylor and Littleton 2012). The precise definition of cultural, or creative, work/labour varies, but the one provided for “creative labour” by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, 9) is sufficient in scope and specificity:

hose jobs, centred on the activity of symbol-making, which are to be found in large numbers in the cultural industries. [They include, but are not limited to,] primary creative personnel such as writers, actors, directors, musicians; craft and technical workers such as camera operators, film editors and sound engineers; creative managers such as television producers, magazine editors and A&R personnel; administrators; executives; and unskilled labour.

In other words, cultural work encompasses all of the component jobs which collectively comprise the production of culture. Obviously, the tremendous diversity of roles does perhaps limit the utility of the concept. Beyond the fact that they are all involved in the production of the same feature film, there do not seem to be all that many similarities between the unskilled worker on a set, say, and the movie director—let alone a studio executive. At this stage, however, I do no more than raise the issue because much of the literature

on cultural work focuses not upon definitive definitions but rather upon the quality of working conditions in the cultural sector.

Unsurprisingly, opinion on working conditions differs widely. Proponents of contemporary cultural labor such as Richard Florida (2002) write of a new “creative class” which is highly educated, mobile, and contributing to economic growth at a time when industrial manufacturing is of declining importance. David Hesmondhalgh (2010), in a different but generally affirming vein, suggests that even unwaged cultural labor should not be immediately equated to exploitation. In contrast, critics such as Richard Sennett (1998, 2006) decry the new flexibility and socially corrosive precarity of even highly-skilled jobs, although he does continue to idealize certain forms of artisanal, hands-on cultural labour (Sennett 2008). Gillian Ursell (2000), for example, is less equivocal, discussing processes of self-commodification as a prerequisite for gainful employment in reference to the growth of freelance work in television. Angela McRobbie (2004, 132) likewise observes:

Professed “pleasure in work,” indeed passionate attachment to something called “my own work,” where there is the possibility of the maximization of self-expressiveness, provides a compelling status justification (and also a disciplinary mechanism) for tolerating not just uncertainty and self-exploitation but also for staying (unprofitably) within the creative sector and not abandoning it altogether.

This subjectivity, and its implied disciplinary and managerial consequences, bears remarkable similarity, of course, to work in universities (see Brouillette 2013; Tokumitsu 2014). As Sarah Brouillette (2013) puts it, addressing her fellow academics, “faith that our work offers non-material rewards, and is more integral to our identity than a ‘regular’ job would be, makes us ideal employees when the goal of management is to extract our labor’s [sic] maximum value at minimum cost.” I would note that to conclude that the exploitation of academic labour is purely a matter of financial exigency is, in my view, premature. Finally, in an attempt to strike a balanced note, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, 234) conclude, from research in three different culture industries, that there are both “good” and “bad” jobs in these industries and that any redress for the “bad” ones must be grounded in broader debates about social justice. Regardless, both proponents and critics of cultural work agree that the social force underpinning these transformations, whether couched in language like “mobility” (Florida 2002) or “self-exploitation” (McRobbie 2004), is the growth of “individuation” (Giddens 1990; Giddens 1991) and “autonomy” (Castells 2009) in neoliberal contemporary society—the same as for the modern university.

In sum, then, the literatures on the neoliberalization of universities and work in the cultural sector overlap the most in their explorations of labour conditions in the two sectors. In both higher education and the culture industries, highly skilled professionals can be exploited, both by themselves and their employers, because their sense of self is intimately linked to the role. This affective attachment to their work also minimizes dissent and makes inequality in the system, the underpaid labour and precarious conditions, easier to police and sustain. In this sense, there is a clear link between academics, cultural workers, and the students who will eventually become casually employed in either of these sectors. However, the literature does not make similarly obvious parallel links between cultural work and the rise of managerialism and creeping corporate logic in universities or the pedagogy of student debt. Yet there are, I would argue, some very interesting connections between these phenomena which ought to be made, and the case of UCLan's new Self-Publishing MA is, as I will show, an excellent route into understanding what they are and why they are important.

Degrees of (Self-)Exploitation: The Case of the MA in Self-Publishing

To understand what makes the MA in Self-Publishing such an interesting case study in these contexts, it is necessary firstly to situate the postgraduate study of publishing generally within both the context of work in the sector and the interests of universities. These degrees purport to offer vocational training in a field which, unlike law or medicine, neither demands professional certification in order to enter it nor remunerates its new entrants lavishly. According to a survey conducted by Bookcareers, the average starting salary in UK publishing in 2013 was a mere £17,775 ("Bookcareers.com Salary Survey Results 2013" 2014). The survey also acknowledges a lack of wage parity between men and women as well as an appalling lack of ethno-racial diversity, with 93.7% of respondents self-identifying as white. Similar low wages and structural inequality have been observed in the publishing industry in the United States and reported in *Publisher's Weekly* (see Milliot 2014a). *The Bookseller* also reports a rise in temporary contracts for positions which would have once garnered permanent contracts, along with enormous competition for those positions; HarperCollins received some 400 applications for an entry-level editorial assistantship, for instance (Farrington 2013).

Given the pedagogy of debt theorized by Jeffrey Williams (2014), it may perhaps come as a surprise that UK universities have tripled their provision of undergraduate and postgraduate media studies

courses over the past decade, at virtually the same time as undergraduate tuition fees for UK/EU students also tripled from £3000 to £9000 p.a. (Shepherd 2012). Naturally, BA and MA degrees in publishing would be included in those media studies totals, and eighteen UK institutions currently offer them (Baverstock and Steinitz 2014b). How do universities benefit from selling increasingly expensive training to students that is unlikely to result in a lucrative—let alone any—job? And why are students buying? A part of the answer is surely due to how universities report their students' outcomes and how that data is used. At present, all universities are required by the UK government to administer the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey, an annual review of employment or educational status six months after graduation. Two pieces of information, average graduate salaries and the proportion of alumni in "graduate" or "professional" jobs, affect the relative reputations of each university. Unfortunately, this data can be manipulated, and a recent anonymously authored exposé in the *Times Higher Education* would suggest that, in at least one case, it has been:

Our telephonists were encouraged to ask art students with no employment or with low-level positions whether they had ever made artwork for family and friends and whether they had carried out any "portfolio-building" since graduating. No matter how tenuous, this allowed the telephonist to enter "self-employed" on the survey form—a result that is clearly preferable to "unemployed". ("Is Employability Data Being Manipulated?" 2015)

In short, the data make media studies degrees look like a good investment, and needless to say, publishing courses proper report very high post-graduation employment rates overall (Baverstock and Steinitz 2014b). UCLan, for example, states on its website that the "MA Publishing has been operating for a number of years and has an employability rate of 96% of graduates gaining jobs in the industry within 6 months" ("Self-Publishing MA" 2015). Note, however, that no further specifics are offered—temporary contracts, freelance work, and even internships all conceivably count—nor is there any mention of salaries.² That some of these jobs are in fact what Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) would reckon as "bad" ones would be a reasonable assumption. But even if universities are selectively truthful on their marketing materials, independent surveys such as those conducted by *Bookcareers* and *Publisher's Weekly* cited above are publicly available knowledge: The competition for "good" jobs in publishing with salary and benefits and potential for advancement within the company is fierce, and although a degree in publishing may be a competitive advantage, it is not a requirement, so the odds are against any one individual getting the job they want.

It is within *this* context, then, that an MA specifically in Self-Publishing can be understood to look attractive to university management. Publishing degrees are moneymakers for universities, cheap to teach and attracting a large number of international students paying overseas tuition fees (Baverstock and Steinitz 2014b), but they are vocational degrees premised upon employment outcomes which, if made fully explicit, might actively dissuade some students or, in a worst case scenario, result in a formal complaint against an institution by a student who feels misled. An MA in Self-Publishing would seem to provide an immediate solution to that particular problem because training in self-publishing would not seem to promise training which leads to full time, salaried employment, virtually by definition.

However, there is far more here than meets the eye. Though definitely a winner from a fees perspective while providing a creative solution to the problem of employability, it is worth giving greater attention to the work that the MA in Self-Publishing does not just economically in the neoliberal university “marketplace” but also *sociologically*. How are students being persuaded to buy what UCLan is selling, and why are the academic staff motivated to sell it in the first place? Finally, what are the wider implications of degrees like this one? Answering these questions requires, first and foremost, a close examination of the degree in the context of its production. Namely, who are the staff producing this course and how do their respective professional backgrounds inform its content and structure? Baverstock and Steinitz (2014a) report an inverse statistical relationship between levels of research activity and industry practice amongst publishing educators in general—their expertise tends to be either vocational or academic, rarely both. As for teaching provision for the Self-Publishing MA specifically, UCLan’s website lists three names under the heading of “Academic Expertise”: Debbie Williams, Wayne Noble, and Helen Day (“Self-Publishing MA” 2015).³ Debbie Williams is identified as the course convener for the MA in the press (Flood 2014; Reisz 2014; Shaffi 2014) and reports relevant professional experience as a former buyer for the bookstore chain Waterstones (“Debbie Williams | LinkedIn” 2015). Both Noble and Day report a mixture of practice-based teaching in publishing and creative writing, along with allied research interests (“Staff Profiles | Dr. Helen Day” 2015; “Wayne Noble | LinkedIn” 2015). Day, the only member of staff with a PhD, highlights interests in “employability and work-related learning in English” on her staff profile (“Staff Profiles | Dr. Helen Day” 2015). None of these three staff members appear on the university’s REF 2014 submission, although at least Williams and Day are in employment long enough to have been eligible (“Results & Submissions: University of Central Lancashire” 2014).

So, the three listed Self-Publishing MA staff are employed for their professional expertise and associated vocational teaching, not for their notional research excellence. Whether or not their conditions of employment match the breadth and depth of their expertise (although in these cases there is little to suggest that they do not), UCLan would seem to regard them first and foremost as publishing practitioners who are not “REF-able.” They are not token research superstars bolstering the university’s prestige on the league tables, nor would not be the obvious candidates to provide research-led teaching in the subject area. No, their own jobs are secured by one thing and one thing only: the success of the courses they teach, where “success” is defined by strong enrollment figures, a suitably large pot of associated tuition fee money, and the employability statistics of graduates.

But as already established, the employability of graduates seeking a salaried career in the publishing industry is a rather tenuous thing. Work experience is a huge leg up, and each year Publishing MA students compete with cohorts from over a dozen UK universities for placements at big commercial houses like Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, and Macmillan. The demand for even these poorly-paid, short-term positions is so great, in fact, that courses struggle to guarantee work-study experience in the industry each year. Those which are unable to do so are obviously at a competitive disadvantage relative to those which do. To recast a publishing degree as training in *self*-publishing would eliminate that immediate annual problem, especially since, otherwise, the same range of substantive skills training in editing, digital publishing, production, and marketing are offered on both UCLan’s Publishing MA and Self-Publishing MA (“Publishing MA” 2015; “Self-Publishing MA” 2015). The fees are the same, too; students are not paying less for less, as it were. From a practice-focused publishing lecturer’s point of view, in short, developing a course on Self-Publishing, as an alternative to Publishing, could be seen as a sublime act of professional self-preservation requiring the least possible amount of additional effort and/or new knowledge acquisition on their parts.

On some level, the elimination of formalized corporate experience may even make sense. After all, acts of self-commodification (Ursell 2000) have become a tacit requirement for full-time employment in the cultural sector generally. Yet on another level, the Self-Publishing MA is notable because it is, for all intents and purposes, a Publishing MA not for aspiring publishing industry professionals but rather *for aspiring authors*. Consider self-publishing as a practice. The alternative, and derogatory, term for self-publishing is vanity publishing—and that is very telling. A traditional book deal means that a publisher pays the writer for a book. The writer pays nothing upfront

and often receives a lump sum advance against future royalties. Self-publishing, in contrast, means that the writer him- or herself pays upfront to be published, and even in the digital age, a self-published book produced and marketed at a professional level can cost thousands (Sattar 2013). UCLan's Self-Publishing MA teaches these aspiring authors basic vocational skills in publishing so that they do not need to pay someone else to do some of the necessary but mundane tasks like graphic design, marketing, and formatting for print and digital conversion for them. Students are not only paying UCLan to learn how to pay to be published. Although some upfront costs, such as purchasing an ISBN and perhaps copyediting services for those typos that are impossible to catch in one's own writing, must necessarily remain, fundamentally, they are paying to learn how to self-exploit. So instead, even, of learning how to write the sort of book that could attract a publisher's investment in the success of one's work and future writing career, students learn how to do the work of a publisher for themselves now—with the understanding that the success of a tiny minority of self-published authors subsequently landed them traditional book deals. This bears remarkable similarity to the justifications used by workers throughout both the cultural and higher education sectors when they accept poor employment conditions now (e.g. adjuncting) in the hopes of a better, more secure position (e.g. a tenure-track professorship) later.

Moreover, as the writings by Brouillette (2013) and Tokumitsu (2014) would anticipate, Self-Publishing MA staff actively model the everyday experience of exploitation and self-exploitation in cultural work to their students. Industry guest lecturers, who volunteer their time either for free or for nominal speaking fees, supplement a full-time staff provision that would be inadequate on its own. UCLan's core staff even advertise their openness to what may be viewed as their own exploitation on social media; Williams states that she seeks pro bono consulting opportunities ("Debbie Williams | LinkedIn" 2015), and Noble jokingly refers to himself as a "worker at the coal face of UCLan publishing" on the short biographical sketch of his Twitter account ("Wayne Noble (@Digital_Noble)" 2015). Humour aside, there is something profoundly unsettling about the act of equating cultural work to coal mining in de-industrialized Northern England on a social networking site which monetizes the free labour of its users (Terranova, 2000; Cohen 2008). He recognizes his own status as a managed professional and then uses that identity to commodify himself for public consumption.

For these reasons, the rhetoric used in the marketing for the MA in Self-Publishing requires an additional layer of disingenuousness which points to a much further departure from the MA in Publishing than differences in substantive course content alone may suggest.

What, exactly, is the point of paying tuition fees of £5000 for vocational training that will neither provide entry into a profession, *nor* any in-demand skills which would immediately allow graduates to write their own proverbial cheque? In fact, even though the students are aspiring authors, it does not offer them formal training in creative writing, either. Consider what Debbie Williams tells *The Guardian*: “Everyone has a book in them,” and “[o]ur new MA will...help them realise [sic] the dream of seeing their book in print” (Flood 2014). In other words, the degree is in the business of making lifelong dreams come true while democratizing access to the publishing process because everyone has “a book in them.”

Note how it is simply assumed that Self-Publishing MA students will arrive in the classroom with a self-publishing idea. It does not need to be a good idea, let alone a meaningful or marketable one—the only criteria to make it worthy of self-publication is that it satisfies the author’s own vanity. The degree provides no clear route into a well-remunerated professional career. It does not even offer training in the development and execution of writing or practice in the various techniques which maximize self-expressiveness and persuasion, as would be expected in a creative writing course—so-called “soft skills” widely applicable to a range of endeavours, from advocacy to PR. And certainly, there is no evidence whatsoever that the degree offers any reflexive, critical insight into the workings of the culture industries as advocated by Ashton and Noonan (2013) or Toby Miller (2012), let alone the broad historical and theoretical knowledge which exposes the contingency of present arrangements, hallmarks of a liberal education, as advocated by Louis Menand (2010). Students will not emerge from the course equipped with the deliberative insights necessary to interrogate injustices or seek answers to social problems.

The MA in Self-Publishing is, in short, a whole new degree of self-exploitation and the neoliberal university taken to its logical extreme. Although it purports to offer democratized access to creative expression and autonomy, academic staff who already exploit themselves are just teaching students how to better self-exploit on the degree, and the students are required to do none of the arduous academic study that would ordinarily be a pre-requisite to having anything worth telling the world in the durable medium of print in the first place. It purports to challenge the status quo, but all it does is encourage students to trade “good” work as a published author for “bad” work as a self-published one. The truth is that they are being indiscriminately sold a pre-validation of their own individuality—no additional intellectual growth required.

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And this, I would contend, is exactly how corporate university administrators like it because, by deflecting challenge and critique away from their organizational domination, it is they, more than any other group in the system, who are winning. Students are not empowered intellectually to contest the status quo or to serve the public good, and academic staff members are probably not qualified to support that sort of learning, anyway. Moreover, even if they were, they are too busy devising ways to maximize tuition revenue for their institutions at minimum risk to their own survivability as practitioners of instrumental training in a sector which has fewer and fewer good jobs for anybody. Indeed, it's hard not to wonder what would happen to people like Debbie Williams should enrollments in publishing studies suddenly collapse; would she find a job back in the publishing industry or at another university? The answer to that question may well be no, and if the answer is no, then these academic staff do not have the necessary professional autonomy to challenge the status quo or serve the public good, either. Therefore, the university which offers degrees like the MA in Self-Publishing is no longer public, if the public university is to be defined, following John Holmwood (2011), by its commitment to social justice.

Now obviously, the MA in Self-Publishing is a highly specialized degree which could be expected to take, in the near term, but a handful of students each year. Nevertheless, the institutionalization of the sort of higher education it represents is, in my view, an early sign of change to higher education in the UK that has troubling ramifications for academic freedom. As Louis Menand (2010, 55) points out:

Almost any liberal arts field can be made non-liberal by turning it in the direction of some practical skill with which it is already associated. English departments can become writing programs, even publishing programs; pure mathematics can become applied mathematics, even engineering; sociology shades into social work; biology shades into medicine; political science and social theory lead to law and political administration; and so on.

In essence, then, an MA in Publishing is a non-liberal MA in English. What the existence of an MA in Self-Publishing shows is that, what would appear to be a direct reversal—a non-practical MA in Publishing—does not necessitate a return to intellectual and professional autonomy in the academy, as Menand would contend. Instead, guided by the growth of “individuation” (Giddens 1990; Giddens 1991) in contemporary society and “self-exploitation” (McRobbie 2004) in the cultural sector, a non-practical MA in Publishing becomes an MA in Self-Publishing, a degree which markets an easy, pleasurable validation of the student's already-existing self through the narcissistic dissemination of the book they already had

“in” them. Neoliberal rhetoric has already recast students as customers and tutors as service providers; now the university becomes a site of conspicuous consumption of degrees which neither challenge the mind nor prepare those who undertake them for any sort of socially, let alone economically, productive future. Furthermore, if Menand is correct, then this non-liberal, non-practical model of higher education can be applied to *any* academic discipline. This model need have only the following two characteristics: 1) It exploits students for tuition fees while promoting self-exploitation in the world of work; and 2) It provides neither a liberal nor professional education.

As I completed the first draft of this article in April 2015, news broke that the University of the Arts London had taken legal action against students staging an occupation at Central Saint Martins (CSM) protesting the elimination of foundation courses for art and design students. *The Guardian* quoted one art student, who remarked, “Management’s decision to criminalise [sic] their own students shows that they would rather spend money repressing students who care about the future of education, than on further education courses which help so many people access education who otherwise would not” (Young-Powell and Gil 2015). Interestingly, these students already got their education. They are protesting not for their own futures but rather for the blocked futures of the students who would have come after them. Still, they are being clear about what they want, and what they want has been met with hostility. So much for the customer always being right.

Clearly, CSM would much rather their students be less altruistically motivated and more selfish—or perhaps a bit more stupid. The concurrent student occupation at the LSE, which was also threatened with legal action and officially ended on 30 April 2015, was blunt in their recognition of precisely this: “We have been infantilized by an excessively bureaucratic, managerial education system. We are supposed to passively float through university, unquestionably accepting the way everything is ordered around us” (Bor, Wilson, and Harper 2015). Pricey degree programmes which neither train students vocationally (to replace them) nor educate them liberally (to see through them) are, in this light, answer to management prayers. Why endure the critique of students and allow them to threaten your six-figure salary when you could instead elect to remove critique from the curriculum and promote the importance of engaging in self-exploitation instead?

And there need be no concern about academic staff standing in principled solidarity with student protesters. A significant proportion is already precariously employed and in a poor position to complain if they do not wish to invite retaliation. Besides, as the literature on

cultural work makes clear, the habit of self-exploitation individualizes employment risk and blocks collective solutions to sector-wide occupational problems. Better still, however, are members of staff who would police themselves, and those teaching on non-liberal, non-professional degrees are particularly excellent candidates to do precisely that. As they are neither liberal nor professional educators, they do not need a PhD, the key credential in the context of the academic profession, or up-to-date industry experience and/or certification in a relevant profession. Without either of those two things, they cannot have the autonomy that is prerequisite to academic freedom. Instead, they are just another category of managed service providers with the veneer of a self-help guru promising personal fulfillment and self-actualization for a superficially modest sticker price. Their incentives would, at last, match their corporate university employer's: profit maximization for the sake of self-preservation.

All in all, the proliferation of degrees with the same underlying logic as UCLan's MA in Self-Publishing are an enormous threat to the university as a site of artistic and intellectual flourishing, for they strip away the educational offerings and expertise which would organically promote such an environment. Worse still, they further concretize hierarchy and inequality by reducing students into customers to be mindlessly satisfied and staff into marginally qualified, endlessly replaceable facilitators—all of them intent upon exploiting the system and each other in order to maximize benefit to themselves when, in reality, they struggle just to maintain their current social position and not tumble further down the ladder. Forget enabling transformative social change or even maintaining the status quo; this is the academy as an actively regressive—even oppressive—institution. But one should not blame academic staff for pricey but value-less degrees or students for putting themselves first when taking on lifelong personal debt to fund that education. Even budget-obsessed administrators cannot be individually faulted. This is just what it means to collectively learn to labour in the neoliberal university.

Notes

¹ Press examples from just a few months in 2014, from three different countries: Japan ("Japan to Help Universities Boost Global Competitiveness" 2014), Russia (Alekseev 2014) and the United States ("More than \$63.3 Million Awarded to Colleges and Universities to Strengthen Global Competitiveness through International Studies and World Language Training" 2014).

² This is entirely intentional; as one of the UK's technical colleges to gain university status in 1992, the University of Central Lancashire's history is in vocational and professional training. It is not an elite university, and its degrees are not prestigious, let alone widely-recognized manifestations of conspicuous, luxury consumption. Conventionally speaking, the value of its education per se to the individual is expressed primarily through the

development of skills and expertise necessary to launch a financially rewarding career.

³ In interest of full disclosure: While my research and teaching overlaps with the field of publishing, I am not personally acquainted with any student or member of staff (past or present) at the University of Central Lancashire and have no privileged knowledge of, or input into, their Publishing courses.

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