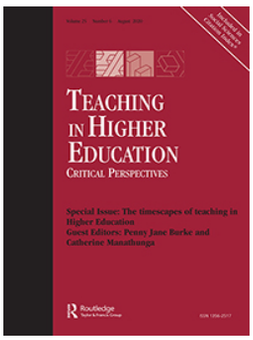

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Making futures: equity and social justice in higher education timescapes

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ABSTRACT

Neo-liberal higher education is preoccupied with the future, with study increasingly viewed as being important for and in the future, rather than valuable in the present. We argue that a preoccupation with the future itself has become the generator of the present as precarious. Paradoxically, the certainty of future transformation or change, forms present uncertainty, which is also experienced as distressing and frantic in pace. We must work to keep up with change and control our futures. We thus explore how these 'proleptic' schemas [Webb and Gulson 2012. "Policy Prolepsis in Education: Encounters, Becomings, and Phantasms." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 33 (1): 87–99], where the future is represented as existing before it actually does, threatens equity and social justice in HE. Overly hasty responses risk overlooking the important differences in people's pasts, presents and futures. Being present, in order to get to know our students, what they know and want for their futures, in all their rich diversity, must be at the forefront of HE.

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Introduction

> In the mirror of the market we can see a possible future for [the university] system. In this future all universities become proper firms … All operations work is outsourced, and all of the teachers are sessional. Staff are appointed by managers. Curricula are trimmed back to fee-earning vocational programmes. Teaching is done online by the cheapest labour available … The most profitable universities have no campuses at all, just brands, managers, and online systems … Only those at the top conduct research. All the research they do depends on military or corporate funding (Connell 2019, 168).

In this warning of a possible future, readers may notice any number of changes that have been introduced across the globe. Connell speaks of a higher education (HE) that moves with the desires of the 'market', and commitments to other concerns such as 'equity' and social justice becoming increasingly reorientated as primarily important for an institution's 'brand' and mostly motivated by financial concerns. 'The future' as a financial concept has also become a central preoccupation within HE strategy, marketing, policy, management and administration. Achieving future financial security for students and university programmes dominates marketing directed at 'thinking about your future' and discourses of employability and 'success'. While this shift in the temporalities of the

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university is increasingly being researched, for example, through studies of the neo-liberal temporal individualisation of responsibility for learning (Bunn, Bennett, and Burke 2019) and processes of acceleration (Vostal 2015), more analysis is required to explore the implications of discourses of 'the future' for equity and social justice in HE.

In this paper, we provide an analysis of the concept of the future in HE for students and staff, and a discussion about its implications for equity and social justice. We argue that as HE becomes increasingly future focussed, university study, and pedagogy itself, produce a disproportionate temporal orientation of HE's value being mostly for and in the future (Clegg 2010). Present practices, value and pleasures in research, learning and teaching are directed toward 'keeping up' with others, always producing and anticipating change while at risk of being out-competed (for example, in employment and research opportunities) or becoming obsolete or irrelevant. We thus explore how HE subjects – particularly academics – are shaped by a growing and deeply felt 'temporal precarity', through the pressure to keep-up, whilst also under the intense scrutiny and surveillance of panoptic webs of governmental, institutional and commercial technologies and measurements that demand acceleration in outcomes and outputs.

We argue that these, in turn, produce overly 'proleptic' (Webb and Gulson 2012) anticipatory schemas (where things are represented as existing before they actually do). Dominant discourses in HE expect agents to act *as if* there is no present to 'be' in and enjoy and/or critique. The present is thrown into flux because of the overfocus on the uncertain, contested and ultimately unknowable character of the future. Temporal precarity creates a pull to compete and to act for the 'nearly there' future, not the present. This plays to an anticipatory function through the production of these proleptic futures, one that must be worked toward, individually, to keep up with. Yet this 'keeping up' with is also the future's very production.

These kinds of projections produce a hyper-teleological present-future of HE and, as such, our predictions and imaginings are both temporally and materially powerful. The effect is of a permeating precarity for both students and staff *today*, and a sharpening sense of urgency to keep up with an increasing pace. As academics concerned with social justice and democracy in education (Bennett et al. 2015; Bunn and Lumb 2019a; Burke et al. 2017), we conceptualise ways that theorising temporality can help to produce mindful and diverse be/comings in HE. We argue that our responsibility is to the present-future, in order to highlight the importance of foregrounding democratic processes of learning, knowing and be/coming. In doing so, we also acknowledge the importance of work aiming to 'slow' the pace of academia (eg. Berg and Seeber 2016; O'Neill 2014). However, a 'slowing' down is not what we wish to focus on here, but the making of the present-future through valuing multiple 'timescapes' (Adam 1998, 2004). We wish to open up appreciation of the value and pleasures of learning and researching that are not just about accruing future financial income, which is not something that HE can guarantee for everyone, especially in an HE system deeply stratified according to institution type, prestige, programme types, and different forms and rates of employment (Gale 2011, 2012). Firstly, we will begin by examining sociological understandings of time, and the future.

Sociologies of the future: power and governance

The ephemerality and pervasive of the future has continued to make building sociologies of the future a challenging task.As Coleman (2017, 525) remarks, 'the future is slippery, ill

defined, constantly moving and, hence, intangible'. Analysis is made more difficult by the dominant Western expression of time as a linear progression of past-present-future. This notion of time assumes that no human actions shift the character or construction of time since it is part of an objective reality, or bedrock ontology, outside of the influence of human designs. Yet, time conceived in such a way prevents exploration of how diverse conceptualisations of time have impacted the construction of human experience. This is notable because of the diversity in ways time has been conceived of and experienced in different cultural, social and historical circumstances (Gell, 1992). Moreover, feminist and post-structural theorists have continued to engage with further problematisation of time (see Barad 2007; Kirby 2011) to escape from these dominant and normative conceptualisations.

Although differences exist in how time and futures are conceived, time has become a powerful tool for domination. As Adam (2004) suggests, the current global hegemony of clock time has been extremely successful, despite various degrees of contestation (see also Thompson 1967). This success can be largely attributed to its invisibility and normalisation. In a Western social context, Adam (2004) explores the historical shift in the way in which time, and in particular, the future, has been conceived to facilitate this domination. Adam (2004, 123–124) demonstrates that trading in time was forbidden, as time itself could not be 'owned', instead belonging to the Christian God, effectively sanctioning speculative trading and debt. During the middle ages this control of the future by the church was gradually relaxed, making trading in the future possible. This shift allowed for the *colonisation* of futures through the *need* to make futures calculable in order to substantiate risks taken in the present as part of the generation of capital. Indeed, as Ewald (1991) and Adam and Groves (2007) articulate, the concept of risk itself was first conceived to calculate the possibility of loss for insurance purposes, using mathematical models to plot the chances of loss of commodities. The emergence, and subsequent proliferation, of the concept of risk, went hand in hand with the colonisation of the future, increasingly conceived as an unwritten, and hence empty and inert soon-to-be condition. The calculation of risks, the odds of negative consequences through certain paths of action, could then *inform and alter* the way we act in the present.

The deepening relationship between the present and future has become a fundamental aspect of systems of governance and regulation. 'The future has become more realistic, not least because the horizon of planning has been extended' (Nowotny 1994, 50). The future is increasingly drawn into the present, what Nowotny refers to as an 'extended present'. This brings into being a greater need for responsibilisation of the future, predicated on its being 'emptied out', whereby futures are subject to 'previously unknown heights' of uncertainty (Adam and Groves 2007, 55). While open futures are seen as an important condition for the production of freedom, 'having divested the future of content and rooted human freedom in nothingness we realise that taming the future has become an altogether different social affair, one that requires extensive collective effort and ingenuity' (Adam and Groves 2007, 56). Without careful planning and production of futures, the future itself is the site of any number of risks and uncertainties. Moreover, this discourse is accelerating (Rosa 2013), saturating daily life and imploring agents (often in multiple and contradictory ways) toward forms of action intent on the imperative to not only accept, but to produce a dominant imaginary of the future. The future seen this way is treated as an empty and neutral space; a vacuum waiting to be filled with our benevolent,

self-interested, or nefarious agendas, scaffolded, paced and timed in anticipatory strategies toward an end(less) pursuit.

'The future' is seen as the key to financial improvement for students, job security and progression for staff, and unit and institutional 'survival.' The desirability of the pursuit of certain possible futures is not always a conscious acceptance of such a scheme being laid out, but rather an opting for a desirable outcome within what people come to assume can be reasonably expected (Bourdieu 2000, 207). For example, academic staff may not desire changes to teaching practices (shifts in curriculum and teaching modes), research practices (pressure to pursue grants and the focus shifting from basic towards applied research) or administrative practices. It is thus difficult to evidence distinct elements of the contestations, since this is what we are always already in the midst of doing. Whether discursively, affectively, or even coercively, the operation of power involves an incremental bending of agents back toward a dominant future timescape.

This is not to overlook the diversity of timescapes that differently positioned people experience. Class, gender, race, and a variety of other forms of disadvantage, marginalisation and different cultural experiences and backgrounds effect, and can alter the way in which time is grasped (Bennett and Burke 2018). Rather, these peculiar experiences are nevertheless interpreted *through* dominant time as it is presented (for instance, within institutions). Experiences of dominant timescapes are likely to privilege the already privileged, who have social backgrounds and dispositions that more closely align with these through understandings of routines and pacing within HE institutions. Moreover, these will likely produce further injustices for underrepresented students as time is treated as an equally accessible resource for all, distributed fairly, and hence more a matter of 'choice' as to how it is used. Hence the 'objective' character of temporality needs to be considered when examining individual experiences of time. Prolepsis – a specific vision projected about what is valuable about HE – serves to erode the *struggled* over character of the future, reducing it to hegemonic versions that appear as common sense. This makes invisible the myriad constructions and contestations of and over the future within different groups and social positions. These include struggles through class (Thompson 1967), feminism (Kirby 2011, 2017), and colonial and Indigenous temporalities (Strakosch and Macoun 2012) among others. Moreover, as Adam and Groves (2007) elaborate, the future has been deeply embedded in the construction of modernity's timescapes through the teleological urges of *progress* that are interwoven into the fabric of daily life (see also Adam 1990, 1998, 2004). Through an analysis of research literature, we now turn to considering how dominant timescapes of the future shape HE.

The future in (and of) the university

The changes in the ways that the future is projected in HE run in tandem to changes more broadly in the labour market, alternately described through influential theories such as cognitive capitalism (Peters and Bulut 2011) and 'immaterial labour' (Gill and Pratt 2008). These theories see the flow of knowledge, and the decentring of the industrial modes of knowing and labour as central to the emerging state of capitalism. Key studies show the importance of HE in this shift, and subsequently the change in the mission, rationale, administration and strategies of HE institutions.

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) *Academic Capitalism* charts the movement towards a corporatised university model (see also Olssen and Peters 2005; Marginson and Considine 2000) that consists of 'a neoliberal policy and governance regime that restructures higher education systems and organisations through regulation, funding streams, and linking organisations that tie the academy to the state and to the market' while also implementing 'a variety of market and market-like actions' (Cantwell and Kauppinen 2014, 5) within universities. This is enacted through governmental policy to institutional executives and all the way down to heads of faculties, schools and disciplines. Indeed, governmental policy now makes regular reference to the direct connection between industry, innovation and research, and the key role universities play in the emerging knowledge-based economy (Kenway, Bullen, and Robb 2007, 123). This results in a narrowing of the ideals of the academy towards industry-applicable knowledge and innovation and vocationally relevant degrees.

The transformation in both the mission and structure of universities have continued rapidly, and have subsequently changed the character of academic labour. Research is not evaluated in terms of the intrinsic value of *new knowledge*, but is evaluated and measured in terms of income, prestige, impact, and even value-for-money. As Bacevic (2019:, 387) summarises, the HE has reframed knowledge 'as a commodity' and subsequently gains its value through marketised exchange. This is particularly concerning for teaching, shifting to what Giroux (2010:, 185) refers to as 'bare pedagogy'; reducing the value of education to that which serves the market and producing students whose singular aim is possessing the knowledge to serve their competitive interests in the labour market. This is apparent in increasingly instrumentalised curriculum, pedagogy and student study methods focused on future worth (Bunn, Bennett, and Burke 2019; Case and Gunstone 2003).

One of the difficulties that the university faces in this fast world, like the politics of the time more broadly (Eriksen 2001, 65), is that the decisions about the future of the university are also having to be made *quickly*. The option to deeply ponder the character, form and contribution of the university is increasingly being undercut, and replaced not only by a business model, but a need to continue to react to the economic, political and social climate in which it is placed. Moreover, this pace is accelerating (Vostal 2015), giving less time for circumspection. There is an increasing absence of the possibility to look back, to examine mistakes and to reconsider courses of action. In its place, one must continually act and *react* to the *in situ* circumstances. The marketisation of HE takes place against the acceleration of its, potentially disappearing altogether into some mixture of professional training colleges (Ernst and Young 2012) and google-administered MOOCs as a part of platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017). Speed is thus perceived as existentially necessary in order to maintain some semblance of the university in its traditional form. It is this overarching anxiety about being ready for the future, a future formed, yet virtual; probable; yet hijacked, that dominates the imaginary of HE. Not only has the vision of the future narrowed, and must be responded to more rapidly, but the hegemony of time in this transformation extends to the temporal orientation *toward* the future itself.

These changes to the mission of higher education cannot, however, be enacted without the complicity of agents within HE. The growth of a sweeping insecurity is seemingly key in reorientating agents away from present fulfilment, towards future security and 'readiness'. This includes the vision of the destabilising of labour where an increasingly

flexible workforce is required that can be shifted into new roles rapidly and as needed. In Australia, this process is championed by consultancy firms (Ernst and Young 2012; Foundation for Young Australians 2017) pointing towards both the inevitably of change, and even the benefits to the labour force bearing the brunt of precarious work. This, as Standing (2011) refers to, is the normalisation of the precariousness of work to the point of a production of a substantial new class of people he refers to as the 'precariat'. This 'spreading precarity' has become 'the dominant *structure* and *experience* of the present moment' (Berlant 2011, 192, italics in original) produced though '"technologies of patience" that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions of the *now*' (Berlant 2011, 28). Future orientated discourses annihilate reference to inherent, or existential meanings that can be derived through HE, and instead reorientate the value of study and research endlessly towards 'readiness' for a yet-to-be-determined future.[1]

Learning, in this case, increasingly serves the purpose of instrumentally serving the functions of a destabilised and uncertain logic of neoliberal production, and market expansion. Universities, made precarious themselves, use the tacit anxieties that precarity produces as part of its own marketing: an optimism that the university is a gateway from the indeterminate character of the future toward a more certain, secure and meaningful occupation and lifestyle.

Regardless of position, precarity permeates HE and its workforce. While this is most severely felt by early career and casual academics (Vostal 2015; Osbaldiston, Cannizzo, and Mauri 2019) 'precarity 'doesn't just go "all the way down" into our deepest psyche, but also goes all the way *up* structurally and institutionally, rendering almost everyone insecure, precarious, at risk' (Gill 2014, 22). This precarity is driven by the endless presence of surveillance, monitoring the performance of academics by their 'grant income, research "excellence", citation scores, student evaluations, esteem indicators, impact factor, PhD completions' (Gill 2014, 22) and a host of other and emerging forms of evaluative measures. It has been argued that 'academics may be becoming … one of the most surveilled occupational groups in history' (Gill 2014, 22). Although it would be insensitive and disingenuous to suggest that academia contains the brutal and oppressive techniques and tactics seen in other industries across the global labour force, the spaces of intellectual production have given over to intensive individualised surveillance and self-surveillance that steadily remove the autonomy attached to scholarship, research, and teaching.

These systems do not only effect the speed of work in academic labour. Rather, measurement and surveillance systems become constitutive of the work themselves. For example, as Burrows (2012:, 361) notes, the h-index 'has become reified; it has taken on a life of its own; a number that has become a rhetorical device with which the neoliberal academy has come to enact "academic value"'. Moreover, these surveillance systems are generated and administered from a web of overarching powers – HE institutions themselves, governments, and commercial providers to name a few. These restructure the character of academic labour to include their own business interests and include the shape of teaching, the value of research, and even the formats and tempo of research outputs. Academics are thus subjected to and compete within what Burrows (2012, 364) refers to as 'a real-time post-panoptic academic e-surveillance system' with 'significant power and scope' to oversee and administer down to the minute daily practices of individual academics.

These changes produce academics who reflexively incorporate competitive systems of self-governance into their habitus (Sweetman 2003, 538). New forms of self-surveillance

and aspiration to achieve reified measures and values of outputs call upon academics to heavily invest in hyper-production. The general anxiety and precarity lies in the hazy possibility of 'keeping up,' always carrying the indistinct yet visceral sense of being left behind. As Gill (2014:, 21, italics in original) summarises in the anxiety around emails, 'simply keeping up with the constant stream of communications' is part of an endless sense of precarity, and of being left behind: 'academics' talk about email is characterised by excoriating self-blame – with abundant metaphors of addition, obsession and failure – when all that is actually going on is that people are trying to manage the unmanageable' (Gill 2014, 22). Wajcman (2015:, 96) recognises this trend in knowledge workers more broadly, arguing that email is linked to a sense of 'a loss of control, in that they feared *falling behind* and missing important information.' Falling behind, combined with precarity, offers a strong means of conceptualising the drive to continually adopt a hegemonic future. *Prolepsis* thus helps to understand how the future is, almost paradoxically, conceived as *almost* certain, yet structured through precarity.

HE is crucial in this form of generation in broader labour market shifts, as it bears an increasing role in the normalisation of precarious work and possibilities. The future, as a hegemonic discourse, has been increasingly emphasised within our perceptual schemas and requires careful and vigilant navigation to retain hope of any sort of ongoing prosperity or ontological security. While differently-positioned subjectivities are confronted with myriad ways to experience and interpret time, these nevertheless correspond to some form of dominant temporal *timescape*.

Social Justice – the past can change the future

What has been outlined thus far is the steady reorientation of higher education temporalities. HE is being increasingly conceived of as the *medium* to achieve a more prosperous future. As the present is conceived as a medium, rather than a valuable position in itself, the decisions, structures and relations within the present become devalued of any *inherent worth*, and only gain value through the soon-to-be. This endless call to turn our attention toward the temporal horizon of the future produces a misrecognition of the deep inequalities embedded within our present timescapes. As Clegg (2010:, 350) warns, the social justice agenda is increasingly projected in terms of individualised 'private benefit and a temporality in which future rewards are discounted against the present investment that students are required to make'. Temporal inequalities become increasingly invisibilised and individual needs privileged above communal wellbeing.

Yet, social justice cannot afford to defer to a utopic future, whereby the inequalities of the present are justified by the teleological path toward their amelioration. This is the unfulfilled promise in HE: the future is where things are *better*, even though they are built on the unjust circumstances of the present. This teleological orientation *subordinates* the demands of the present to this projected future. Yet, we argue that the future needs to be drawn in to the demands of the present. To do this, it is necessary to recognise the temporal domination of the future in HE, while exploring ways of redirecting our attention to the lessons of the past.

We argue that work which *recognises* and values the different positions, knowledges and contributions of students, and the unequal distribution of temporal resources (Burke et al.

2017; Bennett and Burke 2018), must be configured into the building of HE pathways that are directed toward reinvigorating the present with intrinsic value. At times, this is perhaps achieved through strategies of waiting, and moving more slowly and reflectively. Indeed, even the notion of patience (Bunn and Lumb 2019b) becomes somewhat subversive in a system orientated toward hurriedly *producing*. Yet more important, a re-turn to the past is a key step in reinvoking imagination, not through romanticisation of it, but a learning-from:

> The past persists, and its virtual contents are rearranged, restructured, with each passing moment; it is because the past is contracted throughout the continuity of the present that history remains a political force, the site for the unravelling of the givenness of the present. (Grosz 2004, 253)

Grosz' argument brings into question the passive latency of history. The past, history, is positioned as if it is part of a linearity, one that is immutable in its realness, even if it has ceased to be 'real' in the sense of presence. She offers instead a conceptualisation of the past as being only ever part of the present. It 'echoes' (Bunn 2016) in disposition and practice, only ever accessed through our ontological *means* of its interpretation, endlessly restored and distorted by, the conditions of the present.

The dominated-present can also 'leak' (Skeggs 2004), requiring substantial effort put into holding itself together into a dominant future. Yet in this same way 'history produces not only the forces of domination but also the forces of resistance that press up against and are often the objects of such domination' (Grosz 2004, 254). Looking to the future of social justice within higher education requires turning our attention to the past, examining cases of *what could have been*. To reengage a struggle for critical and democratic HE there is a need to turn away from the overdetermined, purportedly preordained future (there is no alternative), and to examine the many cases whereby possibilities and potentialities exist. For example, work understanding the historical production of inequalities in terms of access to HE, and its social and cultural role in the production of privilege is important for reimagining the circumstances of the present, and the reimagining of the future. Moreover, the production of precarity in and through the HE system as alluded to above opens spaces for resistance as much as it works to close them down. This can be seen in the contradictory array of values that HE now attempts to uphold: equity and excellence, knowledge and marketisation and learning for curiosity and interest in contrast to its instrumentalisation. These spaces for resistance can be invigorated by looking to the past as a means of building critique, and for looking for the ways in which the future could be shaped differently. Moreover, the recognition of the value of the past *in itself* challenges the temporal domination of the future. Turning towards these re-readings of the past, their examination for supressed possibilities, detracts from the hegemony of the teleological format that current versions of temporal domination practice.

Conclusion

Higher education is in the midst of a struggle over its purpose within societies across the world. In this paper, we have drawn on theory to argue that a temporal reorientation toward the present is necessary for a meaningfully democratic higher education system. While timescapes (Adam 1990, 2004) are multiple and varied, dominant views of the

present-future are reducing what is considered valuable about, and what is valued in, HE. This is refracted through the multiple temporalities experienced by staff and students, and so brings forth new struggles and competitions within HE. As part of this, it is important to keep in mind our own 'reflexive complicity' (Sharp and Threadgold 2020).

We hope to contribute to a means of thinking about reimagining HE through a different temporal orientation, one that is arguably more conducive to social justice. Presence and patience are important contributions to this process. However, a greater conceptualisation of the importance of the past is also required, and one that is sensitive to understanding *why* the past is offers hope for resistance to the reproduction of domination. The past also serves lives in the present, and offers alternative pathways that *could have been*, and indeed, still could be. It is hopeful that this more inclusive valuing of multiple pasts-presents-futures will be an important contribution to understanding timescapes that reorientate the temporality of HE towards a more meaningful engagement in social justice.

Note

1. This is epitomised by the growing body of consultancy and labour advocacy groups producing 'research' on the necessity of an amorphous set of future-orientated skills. As the 'Foundation for Young Australians' (2017, 3) argues, the arrival of more 'automation, globalisation and collaboration' means that for 'young people to capitalise on these opportunities and navigate the challenges brought by these changes, they need a set of transferrable enterprise skills'.

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