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Neo-neoliberalist capitalism, intensification by stealth and campus real estate in the modern university in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract

This article critiques media commentary on reforms in higher education (HE) and the polytechnic or vocational education and training (VET) in Aotearoa/New Zealand during 2023. It used as its epicentre Gaston's (2023) opinion piece, particularly on the current round of redundancies, rationalisations and restructurings in the sector in our 'post-COVID-19' world. Her suggestion that the reforms as we see them today lead me to explore the origins of neoliberalist ideology in tertiary education in the country, seeking a definition to guide how Aotearoa/New Zealand, in particular, has experienced and manifested neoliberalist policy. The ideology's emphasis on work intensification and responsibilisation at both the level of the individual and the organization lies at the heart of the rationale. Since 2023 has been a year of mysterious budget holes for many universities and for the emergent super-Polytechnic Te Pūkenga/ New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology, I investigate how the media and public domain materials report the financial state of our tertiary providers. Generating a case study of the University of Otago's property portfolio, which grew by two billion dollars between 2012 and 2022, I tap into recent critiques of the university as a real estate portfolio and campus as literally 'flat land' that has the potential to become a domain less in the name of education than neoliberalist capitalism.

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Intensification by stealth

In 2023, tertiary education (TE), including vocational educational training (VET), was constantly getting bad press in Aotearoa/New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa). Critique after critique name-checked the usual suspects: falling student enrolments, the obsolescence of languages and arts, strike action and unionism, the present government's under-investment, the previous government's under-investment and of course the lingering impact of the world's favourite scapegoat, COVID-19. The VET sector suffered the triple whammy of RoVE (Reform of Vocational Education), the circus of the creation of Te Pūkenga (aka New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology or 16 Polytechnics centralised in one entity) and COVID and: the entire sector lost its international student cash cow. But Aotearoa, with its 'number 8 wire' 'can-do' cultural mindset, coped (Kiwis will tell you that the number 8 wire is a national symbol of — or, more accurately, a metonymy for — innovative ingenuity [Te Ara, 2010]). The current narrative is that, while higher and vocational education under COVID-19 may have led to some negative educational experiences both for those in higher education and those considering entering it (that is, school-age senior students), the pandemic positively impacted pedagogical innovation, social adaptation and human resilience. To close this opening paragraph, I cite a resonant and typical Aotearoa academic's experience of the COVID 'era':

I was mostly plugging in daily to an increased workload of responding to anxious students and colleagues. Literally, we (and others globally) transferred our face-to-face teaching, supervision, and service responsibilities onto a digital platform and plugged into Zoom, Google-docs, emails, Facebook messenger, and other platforms... The equity divide became more apparent. The privilege of still having a job, although with increasing workloads, plus the precarity of the job situation, wreaked havoc on our sensibilities—and from New Zealand, the strangeness of it all was illuminated daily on Facebook and via Zoom meetings with international colleagues, family, and friends (Fitzpatrick, 2021).

Amidst all of the 'workload' (intensification is the main theme of the passage), she found time for joy in work. The online intensity was just that: intensification of workload. The facts that e-education is not for everyone (LaPointe & Reissetter, 2008) and that *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face-to-face) learning supports *kaupapa Māori* (Māori research approaches) (O'Carroll, 2013) have long been known in the literature. Education in person, in community, is good.

Yet we also learned that digitization is not just a mode now; it is a product: Massey University's 'Digital Plus' policy may cut back teaching of disciplines in-person at satellite campuses (Tertiary Education Union, 2023a), but is dangerous in prefiguring the fear that synchronous humans can now be replaced by (as opposed to supplemented by) asynchronous versions of themselves. I spoke at a conference with a learner who discovered her online professor had

been dead since 2019. We are squarely back in the space of precarity Standing (2011) had defined (Blackham, 2020; Spina et al., 2023), where increasing numbers of educators are Temporary Tutors or Teaching Fellows, "undervalued, overused, and stigmatized" (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). It may be reductionist to say this, but even our current disruption by Artificial Intelligence (AI) has massification and commercialism at its core and may yet harbour sinister potential, possibly in the form of *superintelligence*, as Popenici (2023) details. Popenici et al. (2023) say: "Artificial intelligence is a marketing concept... It's not a real thing" (p. 2). HE stakeholders, including academics, need to exercise the critical thinking they sell to their learners a little more deeply themselves. Popenici et al. (2023) voice a topos of the subgenre of the ruined university: "Universities are under attack by neoliberalism and the obsession to make education a business and reduce all to profits and markets" (p. 2). This article concludes by exploring an underexamined facet of university business: real estate.

It was not, then, such a surprise to see a return to the old neoliberalist ideology: *let's get back to campus and put those bums back on seats like it's 1984*; in other words, neo-neoliberalism, or return to normal by default. But look closely now: the catalyst of COVID, Saado-Filho (2021), discerned, changes "the transformation of the *crises in neoliberalism into a crisis of neoliberalism*" (p. 186). In Aotearoa, what we have witnessed to date is a return to the old normal, not any new normal, and as Martin Parker, for one, would maintain, this is a worst-case scenario (Parker et al., 2021): "the #buildbackbetter ideas are having a very marginal effect. And substantially, we're just moving back to a slightly lower carbon version of the same system" (p. 61).

A key factor in the post-COVID-19 decline in morale in HE and VET in Aotearoa was the Labour government's "COVID-19 budget" of 2020, where investment in education and research was "not merely in action, but in aspiration" (Gaston, 2023). Despite a 2018 budget to elevate research funding to 2% of the gross domestic product (GDP), only 1.47% was ever achieved, indicating an obvious blackspot of under-investment. University leaders watching the money-flow carefully can be forgiven for thinking the pot still had something in it. Those who have lived through decades of higher education reform in Aotearoa, however, are aware, as Gaston (2023) wrote online: "the crisis in Aotearoa's university and wider research sector did not happen overnight. While funding shortfalls and sweeping redundancies are now making headlines, the underlying problems have been evident for years". We will go back there shortly, but first we will look at some numbers to illustrate the human impact of under-investment.

The numbers of mooted 2022-23 redundancies we know about include Te Pūkenga (400 roles in a VET mega-merger (Schwanecke, 2023); update; to 950 in July (Simmonds, 2023); Massey University (70 non-academic roles as part of a 'funding black hole' (Gerritson, 2022); Auckland University of Technology (AUT) (170 academics); Victoria University/Te Herenga Waka (up to 275 roles or sufficient to cover a \$33m deficit blamed on government underfunding); and Otago University ("several hundred" or sufficient to cover a \$60m oversight). The story of how AUT had to postpone

its redundancy round due to failure to follow process in 2022 is now moot; neoliberalism always overcomes legal technicality.

Otago University's drop is amusing, given the reported statistics that international enrolments increased by 495 and domestic enrolments were down by 670 (*Radio New Zealand*, 2023b) and given the reference to "the expanding student roll" in the preface to the university's real estate master plan (Otago University, 2023a). We know the numbers are approximate and that there will always be other historic factors like the reported 700 job losses nationally in 2021 due to the international student COVID-19 shutdown. But does the loss of 170 students really correspond to a reported shortfall of \$60 million? More recent reporting said, "we don't have a roll drop any more" (*Otago Daily Times*, 2023), 2023). Where did the money really go?

The universities put out an SOS to the government to raise the debt ceiling (Tertiary Education Union, 2023b). On June 26, 2023, the government announced \$120 million to increase tuition subsidies at degree level and above and also help research capability, not applicable until 2024 and not a bail-out, but perhaps an election bribe (the election will be on 14 October 2023): it the most significant increase in 20 years (*Radio New Zealand*, 2023a). The money came not from the above underspend but from an appropriation from *Vote Tertiary Education*, a scheme/report comprising the sums from the 2022 budget cycle (Treasury, 2022). It can, therefore, be best seen as not a bonus but a 'correction' (Tertiary Education Union, 2023b). A simple but biting distinction was made between institutions that managed their money and those that did not (*Radio New Zealand*, 2023a).

The entire research-practice nexus was put under erasure in the HE and VET sector. Simultaneous with the announcement impacting HE research, the role of research in the VET sector, if there is still even to be one, is under investigation as part of the merger of 16 regional Polytechnics into a mega-entity, Te Pūkenga. The mechanism for research funding, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF), with a national budget currently capped at \$315m, would be scrutinised too, even though it was last reviewed only in 2020 with its more "capacious" definition of research for "vibrant, diverse research cultures" (PBRF Review Board, 2020, p. 8). Apparently, post-COVID-19, it is not "fit for purpose", but what, 25 years after its inception, is that purpose? A neo-neoliberal reform where co-governance meets austerity? And what was it ever? A neoliberal reform of responsabilisation. Capacity in research in VET was explicitly protected (PBRF Board, 2020), but will this protection remain? It's postponed until 2026, so anything may happen.

The cost of the Te Pūkenga merger is reported to exceed \$420 million (Simmonds, 2023). The announcement of the \$120 million (for HE) was preceded by an announced \$420 million (a very coincidental number) over four years for the Polytechnic sector as a post-COVID measure and singled out as beneficiaries were Māori, Pacific Island people and women. These monies were for those supporting the workforce, not the providers. The scheme pays employers \$500 per month for the first two years of an apprenticeship

(*One News*, 2023). It remains to be seen how this might be implemented during a time of turmoil for the sector but would seem to be cut from the same ideological cloth as the COVID-19 subsidies: an idea curating business monies over those of individual students or workers. The prime ministerial rhetoric was unsurprising: "Apprenticeship Boost is a great example of how Government can get alongside and support business to invest in their next generation of talent. It's a win-win" (*One News*, 2023). The message for the class of 2023/4 is clear: plumbing good; German and Music (to name the two usually-most-hard-hit disciplines) bad.

Since the Orwellian year of 1984, or thereabouts, the story retracts to an era of neoliberalist capitalism, under which the intensification of academic labour gained a permanent mandate. With this intensification, every year, workload models were tweaked upwards, forcing ever more hours into spreadsheets and definitions of full-time hours were continuously revised to as to reduce hours for preparation, marking, research, scholarship and service. Equations squashing reduced research allotments into Excels meshed with those calculating EFTS, "Equivalent Full Time Student," a measure cast as being to help students settle their workloads but, in fact, weaponised in the battles over staff workloads. The university's process of ongoing intensification to protect the proverbial but mysterious 'bottom line' resulted in tertiary educators literally working themselves to death (Fleming, 2021), while a bloated middle-management siphon off the bucks (Simmonds, 2023).

The *reductio ad absurdum* of intensification has been the post-2020 appearance of job advertisements for 'Teaching Fellows'. These are usually hot-off-the-PhD early career educators, either bright-eyed at getting on the ladder or more worldly permanent members of the precariat who accept that research will not be such an inscribed expectation in the neo-neoliberalist or post-COVID era. Often overheard in corridor conversations is a reference to the fact that The Education Act (1989) mandates that all degree-level educators must be research-active (Gaston, 2023). In fact, in times of change, this nexus is the holy grail, the one fixed point in any submission process.

However, what happens when you do not keep your eye on the ball? The updated 2020 Education and Training Act, entered under stealth when all eyes were on COVID-19, simply says that the "characteristics" of universities are that courses are taught by those involved in "advancing knowledge"; in short, this 2020 update paved the way for the generation of Teaching Fellows, their salaries approximately two-thirds those of traditional academic. The idea of the research-active academic will, I fear, increasingly become a relic. Now, there already, is a massive saving to the bottom line; but under neo-neoliberalist post-COVID capitalism, more cuts must be made. Not cuts from universities' massive property portfolios or Vice Chancellor-type packages, but from staff redundancies, and when the expensive academics are out, we can, at least until the digital lecturers are ready, replace them with more Teaching Fellows. Before we hop to this dystopian future, we need to return once more to the past to identify the problems Gaston (2023) says have been evident for years. I continue this discussion with an attempt to define the 80s neoliberalism in which today's

neo-neoliberal university leaders were indoctrinated.

What is neoliberalist capitalism?

Defining neoliberalism in 2023 is notoriously difficult owing to strong reactions, pro or con and due to its different manifestations and mutations and the unavoidably emotive positionality of authors. Giroux (2008, p. 9) cast neoliberalism as “a broad-based rhetorical and cultural movement designed to *obliterate* public concerns and *liquidate* the welfare state”. McPhail and McNeil (2021) see neoliberalism as best viewed as a confluence of such theories as monetarism and supply-side economics. My emphasis here is on hegemonic neoliberal capitalism (McMaster, 2013). Without the capitalist element, writers like Kelly (2020) might get away with such a statement as “work intensification does not necessarily stem from neoliberalism” (C2). Using sweeping or fit-for-purpose definitions runs the risk Hofmeyr (2021) warned, of being “vacuous and unenlightening” (p. 591). Kelly (2020) does open the possibility that neoliberal is experienced differently by students and staff, about whom the bulk of the literature relates. Everyone will take a side here, but Hofmeyer’s well-considered 2021 definition suffices:

Neoliberalism may be understood as the globalized and globalizing political programme that espouses economic liberalism or ‘laissez faire economics’ as the only means of promoting economic development and securing political liberty (p. 591).

Extending this definition, we can say that ‘neoliberalist capitalism’, usually shortened to ‘neoliberalism’ and synonymous with New Public Management (NPM), denotes the free-market-driven government policies promoting the deregulation and privatisation characterising Thatcherism and Reaganomics. Whitty et al. (1998) wrote that, in the UK, public-sector institutions operated in the manner of private-sector ones. Under neoliberal ideology, private (individual/family) decision-making replaced community-level political or professional judgments but was underpinned by corporate globalism. The individual is free from social constraints or responsibilities to the community (McMaster, 2013). Simultaneously, in HE, collective resistance was forestalled (Davies & Petersen, 2005). The trend reverberated through other countries where the ideology spread like a virus to nations such as Aotearoa. Simultaneously it spread to Howard’s investor state in Australia (Redden, 2017) and, in Aotearoa, both ‘Rogernomics’ (after Roger Douglas, Finance Minister, 1984-1988 and progenitor of the Commerce Act, 1986) and ‘Ruthanasia’ (after Ruth Richardson, Finance Minister, 1990-1993) in Aotearoa.

This fight against the welfare state was known as the New Zealand experiment (McMaster, 2013; McPhail & McNeil, 2021). However the ideology impacted, it manifested itself everywhere as free market thinking and investor ideology. With it came the ethos of individual responsabilisation that blames individuals for their ill health, unemployment or fiscal choices and normalises such repellent stereotypes as the dole-bludger, the domestic purposes benefit parasite and the lazy Māori. This 80s/90s rhetoric of responsabilisation

is echoed by 2023’s economic *autonomy for universities catch-call*, which has led to 2023’s division of the good and naughty universities, cast like biblical wise and foolish virgins. Heckled by distraught students at Otago University who thought universities were ‘spiralling down’, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins said: “the universities make their own decisions about how they manage their finances, so it’s not something we can intervene on as a government” (Brunton, 2023). By law, “universities are autonomous, publicly funded institutions. Along with institutes of technology, polytechnics, and wānanga, universities are Tertiary Education Institutes (TEIs) under the Crown Entities Act 2004” (Te pōkai tara/Universities New Zealand, 2023). Despite officialdom proffering public funding, there is an ongoing hegemonic neoliberalist battle over the word ‘autonomy’. If you have a funding shortfall, it’s your own fault.

Responsibilisation is identified as a driver to develop Otago University’s new approach to campus planning: *the Learning Landscape*: “governments will continue to pressure universities to seek more diverse sources of income that reduce the reliance on government funding and increase the commercialisation of the education sector” (Otago University, 2023a, p. 20). The fact that COVID-19 *interacted* with structural deficiencies or systematic inequalities differently in different locales is white noise. The ‘shady spaces’ of Kiwi fair-go ‘cultural resisters’ that may have appeared to have lessened the impact of full-blown neoliberalism on Aotearoa (McMaster, 2013) are much darker spaces under neo-neoliberalism. This is because it lives under the ever-watchful eye of emergent populism informed by an extreme right, not a new right, making the hegemonic base look very inconsistent and shaky indeed. Totally obscured from this vision is where the money really went, but we suspect it has to do with free market thinking and investor ideology.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, both the investor state and the Commerce Act leave a legacy of social inequality (Bertram, 2020a, 2020b; Redden, 2017). This places what Bertram (2020b) calls an “iron cage” around policy, impacting education and its marketized efficiency agenda which treats consumers’ well-being and potential learners’ access to education as “irrelevant”, evoking Noam Chomsky’s ironic 1999 catch-call of *profit over people*. In Australia, Andrew et al. (2020) dissect the “straitjacket” of neoliberalism knee-capping public response to COVID-19. Neoliberalism has increased the frequency and impacts of “the intensification of inequality, the complexity of financial markets, the rise of digital monopolies and, above all, the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss” (Andrew et al., 2020, p. 767). The prison and straitjacket metaphors recall Giroux’s (2007) critique, *The university in chains*. Of neoliberalist logic in HE, he writes (2009, p. 673):

Within this discourse everything is for sale, and what is not is relegated to relative invisibility. The traditional academic imperative to “publish or perish” is now supplemented with the neoliberal mantra “privatize or perish” as everyone in the university is transformed into an entrepreneur, customer, or client, and every relationship is ultimately judged in bottom-line, cost-effective terms.

Hofmeyer (2021) stresses that in critiques of neoliberalism, “analyses need to be distinct, local studies that are context- and time-specific” (p. 591). In an Aotearoa context, Bertram (2020a) sees the regulatory failure of neoliberal logic as repeatedly inevitable in crises: he namechecks the leaky homes ‘scandal’, the Pike River ‘disaster,’ the ‘outcry’ over electricity company profits, the collapse of finance companies and ongoing workplace accidents and deaths as moments of crisis. The year 2023 has already brought an extended cost of living ‘crisis’ impacted by a bank excess profit ‘crisis’ and a housing crisis caused by a shortfall of affordable accommodation. In each case, Bertram (2020a, 2020b) writes, there were (and are) ‘victims’ of corporate power, their voices again dismissed as white noise and ultimately irrelevant. This is an enactment of the dystopic manta, *Profit over people* (Chomsky, 1999).

In higher education contexts, there were impacts beyond just labour intensification in the form of “overloading of responsibilities” (Ball, 2003, 2012; Shore, 2010, p. 20). The scene was set for the toxic university (Smyth, 2017). There were rules for educators to publish increasingly in quality (e.g. Scopus-indexed or high impact factor) journals, ‘precariousness’ for even tenured academic workers (Standing, 2011; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2022), inequity of access to the education market for learners, and health crises for both staff and students (Tregear et al., 2022), “suicidal thoughts, depression and incapacitating anxiety” (Fleming, 2021, p. 25), impossible workloads and stress-related illnesses (Shore, 2010). Management functions envelop audits for ‘accountability’ and assurance regulations for ‘quality’ (Craig et al., 2014). Ball (2003, p. 224) declared: “Performance has no room for caring”. The Faustian cost for regulators of the efficiency agenda would be their soul (Berkovich, 2018; Minina, 2018)—if they had one. As Ball (2003) allegorised, many educators were forced to give theirs up, Faust-style, in the game of performativity and annual evaluation. In Aotearoa, however, the issue is less speculation as to the presence of souls in neo-neoliberals than the obvious absence of government- or organisation-level leaderly strategic vision (Gaston, 2023) and the stymying of insider voices who lived and breathed higher education under the increasingly dominant populist anti-elite agenda.

Where has all the money gone?

As more and more universities, internationally and locally, restructure, shed disciplines and staff, you can hear people ask, like a Pete Seeger lyric, where has all the money gone, long time passing? In Aotearoa/New Zealand, we can start with the fact that the estimated salaries of Vice Chancellors (Auckland c. \$768,000; Otago c. \$656,000) exceed those of the Prime Minister (c. \$470,000). We might wonder at the statistic that Otago University has a reported ratio of 1.9 professional/general staff to every teaching staff member (Elder, 2017). We might wonder about legal costs as those in contested and reconfigured positions defend their spaces. We can also stop and wonder at Victoria University’s spending half a million to rebrand to Victoria University of Wellington/Te Herenga Waka (Te, 2020): “In an Official Information Act response, the university said it expected expenses to be ‘more than recouped’ through the gains it

made as a result of the brand refresh”. In a paywalled article on the 2023 redundancy round, the Vice Chancellor proxy demonstrated tight-lippedness on the topic of finances: “The balance of extra revenue opportunities is confidential as it is commercially sensitive business information” (Littlewood, 2023a) while the 107 redundancies to date, seen as a \$10 million saving, were enumerated.

With accusations of tone deafness ringing, on March 23, 2023, Otago University set out to do the same thing to a more complex response. They were changing the ingoa Māori (Māori ‘name’) from Te Whare Wānanga o Otāgo/The University of Otago, to Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka/A Place of Many Firsts (McNeilly, 2023). Gifted by the local people (Ngāti Whātua ki Ōrākei), the metaphor is grounded in *whakapapa* (‘heritage’) and corrects the provincial *ingoa* (‘name’) ‘Otago’ to ‘Ōtākou’. The ingoa embraces the university’s place as a *kainga* (‘home’) for the mana *whenua* (‘people of the land’) and *manuhiri* (‘guests’), who collaborate there on educational journeys (de Silva, 2023). De Silva (2023) cites the mana whenua co-design team about the word *Whakaihu*: “it references Otago University as the *motu’s* (‘nation’s) first university and its recognised international standard of academic excellence. Yet it also references the students as champions of their *whānau* (‘families’) and communities”. The decision is compatible with both governmental Statements of National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP) and the Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) to establish priorities for education that will ensure the success and wellbeing of all learners (Ministry of Education, 2023). The rationale is compelling, but there were now four issues: the timing, the cost, the fact that rebranding is something corporations do — and the honouring of the 1840 national treaty, Te Tiriti o Waitangi as per their strengthened Māori Strategic Framework, launched as part of Otago University’s *Vision 2040* (Otago University, 2023b).

The timing and cost came at a bad time: Otago University announced a 60m budget ‘hole’ and a drop in roll cited by the acting Vice Chancellor as the main suspect (McNeilly, 2023). Those still in trauma remembered two years prior when 150 staff were axed in the previous restructure, so the reminder of the corporate nature of the rebrand stung nerves. Populist rhetoric around co-governance/ partnership, seen by the university in *Vision 2040* as the foundation for meaningful and sustainable relationships, put it on a par with critical race theory in the States, a rough approximation, but it serves. The fact that King Charles’s coronation had just happened made the republican debate resurface, and as of mid-2023, co-governance had already become a hot *kumara* (Māori sweet potato and another national symbol) with a looming election.

The problem was not merely the expenditure (reportedly \$670,000, consultation fee of \$126,000 included, but still a figure that barely covers the stationery), but also the ‘wokeness’ of it all. Later in 2023, the absentee but-on-extended-sick-leave new (17 months) Vice Chancellor David Murdoch resigned, triggering another expensive international spin of the VC Merry-Go-Round. Te Whare Wānanga o Otāgo’s long-planned *Vision 2040* (Otago University, 2023b) launch, the expensive footprints of consultants more vividly on display with the budget crisis,

was drowned out by the white noise. Where, indeed, does all the money go? The trail on both universities' rebranding went cold until Otago announced its rebranding was full-steam ahead. Three-quarters of submissions were in favour (Ellis, 2023). More good news came to deflect the eye: the Tertiary Education Commission gave the university strong scores for "student qualification completion (74%), course completion (88%), first-year retention (83%) and progression (93%)" (Littlewood, 2023b). But rebranding (and the spin that inevitably follows) is just one topical site where neoliberalism meets culture wars. Nowhere is this the question of where the money goes more mysterious than in universities' acquisition of and investment in real estate — seemingly over quality education. Are our universities real estate portfolios with education on the side?

Here's a case study. At Otago University, a four-person Property Management team acts as 'landlord', managing the University's ostensible \$1.6 billion property inventory. In 2012, Otago University's assets eclipsed those of all universities nationally and were reported as including \$855 million in buildings, \$205.9 million in land, \$19.4 million in cash/cash equivalents and \$9.4 million in rare books, manuscripts, and artworks (Elder, 2021). With expert consultants (cost certainly in an annual general report), the university enacts a 25-year master plan which includes "acquisition of adjacent properties where possible" (p. 109) within an extensive 8-precinct zone. Here, in fluent 'corporatese', is the vision: "we create, develop and maintain the University's campuses in a way that inspires and supports excellence in all who experience them". Ostensible goals of sustainability and pedestrianisation are pleasing on paper but hardly gel with a culture where owning and parking a car has increasingly become a student's individual right and choice since around 1984. In addition to bisecting arterials and s-bend state highways, the university's current major bugbears are the historic Kelsey Yaralla Kindergarten, around which plans need currently to be diverted, and the Cumberland Court Motel, "and it is recommended that no development *be countenanced on this site that would preclude* [the university's] option" (italics to emphasise the formality; p. 123). "Significant costs" will be incurred by correcting the S-bend highways (p. 117) in this 25-year plan, so a Plan B is in place: a new pedestrian mall with a pedestrian bridge over the biggest arterial.

There are master plans for Christchurch and Wellington, too, largely for medical schools, again predicated on growth in student numbers: "For the purpose of Master Plan scenarios, the University has forecast a potential increase of 212 postgraduate EFTS (coursework) and 140 postgraduate EFTS (research) by 2030" (p. 151). The Master Plans identify numerous desired sites. In any statement of financial position released, the category 'property, plant and equipment' towers above any other category as a "non-current asset". The university's interests in developments around the campus were reported as "underpinning" the commercial property market in the area (Elder, 2012). A nest egg of \$2 billion was described, "mostly made up of property, plant and equipment" (Elder, 2017). Nowhere in the recent public domain is information on the estimated cost of the acquisitions and corrections decipherable by non-accountants, nor of the costs already incurred in more



Figure 1. The University of Otago. Photo by the author (30/07/23).

recent acquisitions and in ongoing consultancies. The annual general reports are extensive and dense, and there is no better place to bury data than in plain sight, and the devil is always, usually literally, in the detail.

The potential property portfolio of the university is speculative locally and nationally but is part of an internationally normal practice. This practice is seen as impacting the availability of affordable accommodation, a palpable trend in Dunedin, the city that houses the University of Otago. In *The University in Ruins*, Readings (2011) drew a potent analogy between the ruined city and the university: Neither longing for the past nor present consumerism bring our disparate disciplines' values back together. With reference to the University of Chicago, Haar (2011) demonstrated the parallel nature of developments in pedagogical transformation and a location for the larger purpose of the academic community; the interrelationship of knowledge and urbanism. *Campus*, the Latin for 'field', becomes in itself an ideal "univerCity", a planned city in microcosm (Turner, 1987).

The case study of Otago demonstrates a desire to extend its campus utopia of historical and bespoke architecture and precincts into the city itself. While universities both in Aotearoa and the States are non-profits, Grabar (2018) wrote online, "you would be hard-pressed to find a [university] that has *not* thrown itself into commercial property development". In the notion of the campus, we witness a blurring of the not-for-profit and the profit-driven. Indeed, economic development becomes the academy's main focus to the point that educational institutions no longer exist for the public good, for equity. Since a sustainability agenda is writ large, as in our case study, we cannot say that neoliberalism is "unsustainable in view of the imperative of protecting the known forms of life on Earth" (Saad-Filho, 2021, p. 181). Baldwin (2021) writes about how universities are annexing and plundering our cities' real estate. Mission creep is at work: their core business is not education but profit-driving real estate, the funding arms hidden from public scrutiny. If the education arm loses money, don't cross-subsidise; cut it off. Economic development is the modern university's focus (Grabar, 2018).

Anti-conclusion

Where has all the money gone? And where is evidence of universities' ability to self-critique? It would be premature to suggest Aotearoa/New Zealand universities would sooner lay off staff, including educators, than reduce their empire-building ambitions. It would be merely a hunch to suggest that monies invested in real estate are more economically productive in that form to stakeholders than they would be as educator salaries. It would also be amiss to posit any link between housing shortage and university property buy-ups, though the languaging cited above about Cumberland Court near Otago University is a compelling example of 'hands off that property, the university has first option'. Any suggestion that universities should deprioritise image building as rebranding during staffing crises is merely something a reader might infer. I certainly have not suggested that there may be substantial legal costs in the current landscape of layoffs, redundancies and sudden departures. And any insinuation that one Vice Chancellor is worth six or seven teaching professors is simply beyond the scope of this paper. Whatever you may infer from Otago University's 2b increase in property portfolio between 2012 and 2023 based purely on published figures is your own business. Neo-neoliberalism not only brings in work intensification by stealth; it also blurs the university's function as a fair employer/education provider/real estate portfolio holder. The scholarship might say the HE sector has lost its heart as well as its soul, sucked by neo-neoliberals. How do we, in Fitzpatrick's words (2021, p. 796), "'kick-start' our heart beat again"?

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