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"NEVER LET A GOOD CRISIS GO TO WASTE": HOW CONSULTING FIRMS ARE USING COVID-19 AS A PRETEXT TO TRANSFORM UNIVERSITIES AND BUSINESS SCHOOL EDUCATION

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During the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, major management consulting firms published numerous reports calling for "revolutionary" change in universities, including business schools. Leaders should use the crisis as an opportunity to transform their institutions into digital platform businesses, resembling Spotify or YouTube. By critically analyzing these reports this essay seeks to make three contributions. First, at the university level, I conceptualize these recommendations as an expression of *extreme neoliberalism*, consisting of "crisis opportunism" and "libertarian utopianism." Second, moving to the business school level, I argue that the influence of management consultants provokes a *professional paradox*, especially among management educators. This has significant implications for the legitimacy of business school academics. And thirdly, I propose that the business school community is uniquely positioned (*vis à vis* other schools in the university) to challenge extreme neoliberalism. Three avenues of resistance are posited, focusing not only on consulting firms but their clients too - senior university executives.

In the dark depths of January 2021—when the COVID-19 pandemic had closed university campuses around the world—the U.K. arm of the consulting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) published a report entitled "COVID-19 recovery and improvement: Locking in the benefits and overcoming the challenges" (PwC, 2021a). Although largely unnoticed in academic circles, the report was a radical intervention in our profession. PwC interviewed 36 chief financial officers (CFOs) in U.K. universities and asked them the following:

1. What do you see as the top three positive changes that have been made within your Higher Education Institution (HEI) in response to the pandemic?
2. What approach, if any, is being taken in your HEI to "lock in" these changes and ensure they are embedded? (PwC, 2021a: 6).

Casting the pandemic as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to embed transformational change in higher education, the report emphasized the *positive* consequences of the upheaval. Three such consequences stood out for PwC. First was the rapid and systematic pivot to online teaching, which PwC termed "digital acceleration." Encouraged by the growing EdTech industry, university leaders had been trying to embed hybrid and HyFlex learning for some time (Mirrlees & Alvi, 2020; Teräs, Suoranta, Teräs, & Curcher, 2020). The pandemic provided justification for doing so on a previously unimaginable scale. Worker productivity was the second benefit of COVID-19. The near-constant online presence of instructors and big-data performance metrics produced "a mindset shift within the workforce away from a model of presenteeism to a renewed focus on more beneficial productivity metrics" (PwC, 2021a: 8). Third, amid the emergency senior executives were liberated from the need to consult with faculty. Consensus decision-making was displaced by centralized management hierarchies, which PwC deemed a major benefit.

Research has long understood how consultants often leverage or construct critical incidences to help enact change in client organizations, especially unpopular changes (Armbruster, 2006; Sturdy, 1997). In addition, research is already indicating that "pandemic consulting" has been a boon for this reason, particularly in the public sector (e.g., healthcare,

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libraries, governmental services, etc.) (Vogelpohl, Hurl, Marciano, Purandare, & Sturdy, 2022). But what about higher education, and the business school more specifically? The growing influence of consultants in primary and secondary schooling has been extensively noted (Gunter & Mills, 2017), but their activities in universities remain relatively obscure (Serrano-Velarde, 2010). This is probably due to the stealth *modus operandi* consultants adopt in higher education (McClure, Barringer, & Brown, 2020; Seidenschnur & Krücken, 2019; Serrano-Velarde & Krücken, 2012). Critical management studies of the neoliberal university (and business school) do not have much to say about this either, concentrating on tensions between senior managers and teaching staff instead (e.g., see Alakavuklar, Dickson, & Stablein, 2017; Fleming, 2020; Fotaki & Prasad, 2015; Spicer, Jaser & Wiertz, 2021).

It is reasonable to assume that the consulting templates being used in universities are not that dissimilar to those deployed in the public (and private) sector more generally. Nevertheless, the industry's recent publications on tertiary education—like the PwC one above—provide valuable insights into how the industry perceives universities and their future. An unusually high volume was published during the first two years of the pandemic, which is the focus of this essay. The 16 reports and position papers I analyze all convey a consistent message to current and potential clients (i.e., university decision-makers): exploit the pandemic as a catalyst to *radically* transform your institution into a *digital platform business* if you wish to survive. Ernst & Young (EY) (2021a: 18) summed up the overall sentiment: "higher education is dead. Long live the knowledge services sector! The future is closer than you think. Change now—or never."

It is tempting to dismiss bombastic claims like this as empty rhetoric—but that would be a mistake. To demonstrate why, I offer what Vince and Hibbert (2018) termed a "disciplined provocation" with respect to these pandemic reports. The recommendations proposed in them may soon become reality and we need to gain a better understanding of what that means for management education. By doing so, I hope to make three contributions. First—and at the level of the university as a whole—it is argued that a kind of *extreme neoliberalism* (Harney, 2009) is being formulated, which I define as an amalgamation of "crisis opportunism" and "libertarian utopianism." By crisis opportunism I mean the strategic use of an emergency to usher in radical reforms that would have otherwise been unthinkable. In her influential book *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), Naomi Klein noted how unpopular free-market policies (e.g., privatization of public services) are implemented with relative ease in the wake of major disasters. Paraphrasing Milton Friedman (1962/1982), "never let a good crisis go to waste" encapsulates this tactic. By libertarian utopianism I mean the promotion of an impossibly pure ideal of market commercialism, pitching it as the only solution to present problems. Doctrinaire libertarians like F. A. Hayek (1949) developed this strategy to combat left-wing utopian thought. The goal was not to realize this free market Arcadia, Hayek argued, but only to move the dial in the desired direction.

Second, I analyze the specific implications for business school educators, especially those working in management departments. I suggest that the growing influence of management consultants introduces a *professional paradox* for management educators. It is remarkable that external experts are enlisted for help when in most business schools one would find leading scholars on organizational change, leadership, strategy and so forth. Moreover, how can management schools insist that their research has important social "impact" when they themselves do not use in-house knowledge? I foresee this professional paradox fueling a legitimacy crisis in business schools.

The third contribution concerns resistance and alternatives. Can the discourse of extreme neoliberalism be opposed in universities today? I believe it can, and suggest that business school educators are uniquely placed to do so *vis-à-vis* other schools in higher education. I outline three avenues of resistance in this respect. Apart from the potential legitimacy crisis mentioned above, clarifying these avenues is crucial for several reasons. For instance, business schools may end up as a primary testing ground for these radical reforms, especially given how we are seen (accurately or not) as natural allies of the consulting industry. After all, many of our graduates find employment there and we dedicate considerable teaching units to the profession. In addition, the business school's reliance on international students and its "cash cow" status among *C*-suite executives could identify us as an obvious candidate for an EdTech revolution—hence the purpose of this essay. Notwithstanding the pervasive fiscal rationality being used as a pretext to justify extreme neoliberalism, none of this is inevitable or the only way forward. If adopted, though, some of these recommendations will be difficult to reverse. I want to denaturalize this air of inevitability and arm readers with a counternarrative to extreme neoliberalism. Otherwise, if the utopian ideals being sponsored by this secretive "consultocracy" (Hood & Jackson, 1991) do genuinely infiltrate business school education, then I predict that our profession will take on decidedly dystopic characteristics.

The essay is structured as follows. After discussing the growing role of consultants in higher education, I examine 16 pandemic consulting reports and position papers that focus on universities (see Appendix A for further details). Two aspects of extreme neoliberalism are identified in the reports, which I term "crisis opportunism" (i.e., COVID-19 as shock doctrine) and "libertarian utopianism" (i.e., revolutionary solutions to the crisis). Here, the level of analysis is the university. The second section turns to extreme neoliberalism in the business school. The influence of consultants in this context may engender a "professional paradox" and potential loss of legitimacy, especially in management departments. This sets the scene for the third section, where I conceptualize three avenues of resistance available to the business school community: namely, building our own counterutopias, using factual data to debunk the unrealistic proposals disseminated by consultants, and organizational reforms designed to increase the transparency and accountability of their activities in our institutions. The essay concludes by encouraging debate and future empirical inquiry about this troubling trend in higher education.

CONSULTANTS SELLING "EXTREME NEOLIBERALISM" TO UNIVERSITIES

While we have a good understanding of how management consultants operate in the public sector as a whole (e.g., see Fincham, 1999; Galwa & Vogel, 2021; Hood & Jackson, 1991; Sturdy et al. 2020; Van Den Berg, Howlett, Migone, Howard, Pemer, & Gunter, 2019; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019), their activities in universities have received less attention. According to Serrano-Velarde and Krücken (2012), as governments sought to commercialize the public sphere from the 1980s onwards, management consultants soon assumed a crucial role, including in universities. Serrano-Velarde and Krücken (2012) argued that a *consultocracy* (see also Gunter, 2015; Hood & Jackson, 1991; Saint-Martin, 2004; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019) now functions in the shadows of higher education, deploying business logics that are often ill-suited to universities, particularly public ones. For example, investigating firms working with British, French, and German universities, Serrano-Velarde and Krücken (2012) observed consultants clashing with basic academic norms. In the acrimonious words of one senior German consultant:

> Academics can't stop asking critical questions about everything. They discuss decisions for hours and ask me to be more specific about my empirical and theoretical framework. After I tell them, they start discussing the problem all over again… That's so typical about working in universities. (as cited in Serrano-Velarde & Krücken, 2012: 283)

According to McClure (2017), because corporate consultants are frequently derided as purveyors of "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) by teaching and research staff, it is unsurprising that university executives downplay consultants' role in key policy decisions. Moreover, many institutions can hide expenditure on consultants in their public records, logging them as contracted services along with security, catering, etc. This low profile is important when consultants lead unpopular restructuring programs, including layoffs and "rightsizing" exercises. For this reason, the consultancy reports published during the pandemic are revealing. They provide a window into the management models being formulated, packaged, and sold to university leaders.

COVID-19 as Shock Doctrine

In what follows I examine 16 reports and position papers published by the consulting industry about higher education during the first two years of the pandemic. This is not an empirical study, so I do not treat the reports as "data" but more as provocative illustrations. My approach is intended to raise awareness about this significant and neglected topic, and hopefully prompt future in-depth empirical inquiry. Nor should these documents be confused with concrete practice, particularly given their utopian flavor. However, they do offer insights into the conversations underway at the executive level, which may soon inform management policy. When selecting the reports, I included the largest and most influential global consulting firms (eight in total) and tried to capture a relatively wide geographical spread (Australasia, Continental Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, etc.). In terms of method, I identified common themes across the 16 documents that consistently appeared. Not everything therein illustrated extreme neoliberalism, but a great deal did.

The 16 documents draw on various information sources, but typically consist of interviews with senior university managers, who are also presented as the target audience. Anecdotal case study evidence of client projects is often used too. Tellingly, very few teaching (or research) faculty are surveyed about their views in these publications, which raises an important observation: Consultants are not masters of the universe in this context, but servants of power too. Therefore, critical scrutiny must also be directed to their clients (also see O'Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016; Sturdy & O'Mahoney, 2018)—in this case, senior executives in the neoliberal university who have overseen the deep infiltration of consultants into our profession.

The first noteworthy feature of these publications is the thinly veiled enmity they display toward higher education providers. According to KPMG (2020a: 5), the "gloss has come off" with employers, taxpayers, and students. Furthermore, all the documents aver that universities must start thinking like private corporations if they are to survive the pandemic. Bain (2021), for example, suggested that universities have no choice but to

> apply private-sector principles to better control the cost of growth, innovation and operations. Who are our target customers, and what are their priorities? What is our core proposition and product? How do customers pay? How do we deliver the offering? What do we outsource?

All 16 documents justify this recommendation by foregrounding the financial devastation sweeping through higher education today. Decision-makers are reminded that "Covid-19 is pushing many US colleges and universities to a financial precipice" (Yee et al., 2021) and that "universities around the world are in trouble" (KPMG, 2020b). Doing nothing or trying to wait out the crisis is a recipe for disaster: "there are going to be winners and there are going to be losers. If you do the same old thing, you will be a loser" (McKinsey, 2021).

The only rational response, therefore, is to fundamentally rethink the university business model. In this vein, EY (2022) have championed managerial "revolutionaries" as opposed to "traditionalists." These leaders are entrepreneurial rebels who seek to disrupt the status quo. The precise *content* of this revolution has not yet been explained; we only know that it must be *extreme*, as PwC (2020: 1) pointed out: "in order to succeed, [leaders] will need to reimagine the very nature of higher education. They'll need to transform the whole organization." Once this discursive groundwork is laid, extreme neoliberalization appears.

The first component is *crisis opportunism*. It is typically framed as a moment of empowerment for university decision-makers. They must mentally invert the threat posed by the pandemic into a rare opportunity, as EY (2020: 20) have argued:

> During the uncertain times ahead, higher education institutions and their leaders may need to seize upon the momentum COVID-19 has created to continue evolving … COVID-19 has accelerated existing headwinds in higher education, and leaders may need to seize this opportunity as a catalyst for institutional transformation.

This crisis opportunism exemplifies what Naomi Klein (2007) called the shock doctrine. EY (2021a: 18) even evoked this terminology: "the COVID-19 pandemic is a systemic shock that brings our higher education sector to the fork in the road." Klein (2007) argued that major neoliberal policy reforms—such as privatizing state-owned assets—frequently capitalize on a crisis because the public are disoriented and more tractable. The crises may be natural (e.g., Hurricane Katrina) or manmade (e.g., U.S. invasion of Iraq). For example, only days following the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans, the public education system was swiftly supplanted by charter schools. This controversial model replaces public oversight with a private market system (albeit funded by state vouchers). While the community was still reeling, a wealthy investor commented, "I think we have a clean sheet to start again. And with that clean sheet we have some very big opportunities" (as cited in Klein, 2007: 4).

Klein traced the shock doctrine back to Milton Friedman. He advised the brutal Pinochet government when it radically restructured the Chilean economy following the 1973 coup. In the 20th anniversary edition of *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman (1962/1982: xii–xiii) explained the importance of emergency situations when enacting market reforms that citizens would otherwise reject:

> There is enormous inertia—tyranny of the status quo—in private and especially governmental arrangements. Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.

The "ideas that are lying around," I suggest, are precisely what these consulting publications are producing regarding a radically new higher education system.

Teaching and Learning Utopia According to KPMG et al.

The second component of extreme neoliberalism—libertarian utopianism—outlines what this new, or "future-fit," university will look like. All the reports have posited what appears to be an extreme version of Amazon minus the enormous salaries. Traditional institutions will be replaced by digital platforms (supplied by powerful EdTech corporations), big data performance metrics overseen by entrepreneurial leaders who have carte blanche decision-making powers, an on-demand or cost-effective (untenured) teaching workforce directly connected to customers (i.e., students) via digital wearables and blockchain, the automation of middle management, a YouTube-inspired pedagogy that entertains students first and foremost, "nano-degrees" (instead of standard degree pathways) delivered in an "anywhere, anytime, anyhow" fashion, drones deployed to rightsize conventional campus expenditure costs, etc. You see the catch? Not even Amazon and Jeff Bezos could realistically live up to these techno-libertarian ideals. It is therefore better to read these documents as "utopian manifestos" for revolutionary change in tertiary education. These manifestos are informed by anarcho-capitalist principles and a near militant veneration of digital commerce.

We tend to associate utopianism with socialist left-wing thought. However, as Polanyi (1944/2021: 3) observed regarding mid-19th century capitalism, economic liberalism too has a "stark utopian streak." Neoliberal economists ardently revived this utopianism soon after World War II. In his essay "The intellectuals and socialism," Hayek (1949: 432) complained that socialism had cornered the market in utopian theory. Free-market libertarians needed to enter the fray and plan their own perfect society:

> What we lack is a liberal Utopia, a program which seems neither a mere defense of things as they are nor a diluted kind of socialism, but truly liberal radicalism which does not spare the susceptibilities of the mighty (including the trade unions), which is not too severely practical and which does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible.

By the 1990s, libertarian utopianism had joined forces with digital capitalism. What Barbrook and Cameron (1995) sardonically called "The Californian Ideology" saw techno-utopianism become a driving force in Silicon Valley. Education is a recurring bugbear. Learning has been corrupted by Big Government, according to Artificial Intelligence (AI) entrepreneur Sebastian Thrun: "education is broken. Face it. It is so broken at so many ends, it requires a little bit of Silicon Valley magic" (as cited in Teräs et al., 2020).

As it emerges from the pandemonium caused by COVID-19, what does the utopian university exactly look like according to the big consulting firms? Six features consistently appear.

The first concerns the wholesale digitalization of teaching in the "Smart Campus" to come. The pandemic supercharged this process. However, major advances in AI, drone technology, neutral nets, blockchain, and big data will soon revolutionize the higher education sector. As a result, PwC (2021b: 7) have argued, "every institution, whether they have a physical or digital campus, will need to become a digital university." The success of HyFlex and blended learning during the crisis, EY (2021b) have remarked, proved that "the campus is dead: Rather than sitting in a classroom at a set time, students are seeking on-demand access to personalised and high-quality learning materials from a digital platform." KPMG (2020a: 11) agree: "one thing is clear. The university that expects students to battle with traffic, find a parking place, go to a lecture, write examinations by hand, get a seat in a crowded library and then go home again will be riding its luck."

The cost savings associated with online learning are significant, as noted by a senior administrator interviewed by PwC. The pandemic provided "a real opportunity to rightsize our estate. The estate footprint is vast and our experience of home working and blended digital learning has given us a new lens to better utilise our space" (PwC, 2021a: 22). PwC have suggested that drones, wearables and blockchain can also be used for this purpose. Automation too has been regularly mentioned. As KPMG (2020b) argued:

> Robotic process automation and emerging smarter technologies could eliminate much university administration. Machine learning, also in its infancy, will be able to conduct most of the process of research, leaving academics to design projects and translate the findings. These technologies we now know are possible. What is missing at the moment is the alternative vision of what a university could look like.

The second feature of the future-fit university involves the use of digital platform business models to deliver teaching and learning. EY (2021a: 3) asked university leaders the following: "imagine that accessing learning in 2030 is like listening to music via Spotify in 2021. It's a do-it-yourself or self-directed experience—for a very low fee … you create and share your favourite educational playlists."

KPMG (2020b) also recommended "envisioning the university as an app and a platform could be, as we have seen in other industries like taxis and entertainment." Indeed, fee-paying customers (i.e., students) demand to be entertained, as noted by the deputy vice chancellor of a New Zealand university: "the future for universities is to both stream like Spotify and offer experiential learning like a Crowded House concert" (as cited in EY, 2021a: 6).

The third feature of the future-perfect university is summarized by what KPMG (2020a) termed the "Age of the Customer." Before COVID-19, universities took students for granted and prioritized academic needs. Not anymore. The "golden years" are over and universities must put the customer at the heart of all it does. For PwC (2020: 15), digital platforms are the answer once again:

> At a time when there are significant changes and challenges ahead, and the voice of the customer is more prevalent than ever, providing a high-quality digital experience will help turn your customers into advocates for your university.

That proposal leads to the fourth feature of the utopian university. Almost all the reports have criticized educators for not producing job-ready graduates with *practical* skills. Traditional degrees are completely out of sync with the labor market, including those offered by the business school. According to KPMG (2020a: 5):

> the gloss has come off with employers… many employers say they are looking primarily for things that universities do not directly teach and the expectations of graduates by employers are being disappointed.

For this reason, PwC (2021c: 4) have insisted that industry should have greater input into syllabus content: academics must "make room for more para-academic roles and focus on equipping students with applied skills and better employability outcomes." Moreover, the conventional three- or four-year degree is outdated. Short-term "micro-credentials, competency-based education, nano-degrees and curated degrees" are much preferrable (KPMG, 2020a: 15). These degrees should be offered in an on-demand fashion, superseding antiquated academic calendars. Anytime, anyplace is the new mantra.

The fifth feature of the utopian university concerns teaching staff. They will primarily be experts in computer technology. Furthermore, instructors will be attuned to the distinct preferences of individual learners or customers, even in large classes. Wearables will be indispensable here, according to PwC (2020). They have asked leaders to "reimagine" their institutions "using location technology to deliver personalised experiences for staff and students across the physical campus—imagine your arrival [as a student] at a lecture prompting a notification for the lecturer" (PwC, 2020: 9). This technology would also help managers allocate and monitor teaching through clustering algorithms, including KPIs linked to real-time performance dashboards:

> A wealth of data is collected from a range of internal and external sources, such as mobile and wearable devices, that can be analysed and presented back in an interactive and highly visual fashion. Universities are able to analyse data intelligently and use that information to improve academic performance. (PwC, 2020: 8)

KPMG (2020b) have claimed that digital platforms will drive down degree prices as market competition intensifies, making current academic salary levels unsustainable. They have warned university leaders about "Baumol cost disease," a "chronic ailment" caused by salaries outstripping productivity. In short, teaching staff are paid too much. EY (2020) has congratulated university leaders for reducing staffing costs during the pandemic. Early retirement, redundancies, and various labor intensification measures were all necessary, but a more radical approach is now required. Mass automation, outsourcing, and rethinking tenure are potential options. For example, the following questions have been posed to university leaders:

> What will the role of tenure be for your academic workforce going forward? How can you enable a more efficient workforce (e.g., decrease administrative complexity, enable telework)? Options such as multi-year renewable contracts, teaching-only tenured positions, faculty-sharing models across institutions and diversified incentive structures may be paths forward. (EY, 2020: 16)

The sixth and final feature of the techno-libertarian university concerns the role of senior management. During the pandemic, consensus-based norms (where academics discuss and debate major decisions that affect them) were sidelined in favor of centralized, top-down command structures. Such managerialism was already well-advanced in universities before COVID-19 struck, of course (Ginsberg, 2014; Lorenz, 2012), but the crisis proved that deliberative governance norms are "a hindrance to decisive action" (McKinsey, 2020). For PwC (2021), the suspension of collegial dialogue during the pandemic was a big win for university executives. Even staff unions were deferential, as noted by PwC. Various centralized management structures should thus be locked in, such as "establishing structured 'gold command' meetings to expedite decision making, with less consultation required" (PwC, 2021a: 7).

EXTREME NEOLIBERALISM IN THE BUSINESS SCHOOL

It would be a mistake to dismiss these utopian manifestos as harmless rhetoric. The consultocracies operating in the background of our institutions increasingly have input into decisions directly affecting teaching and learning (McClure, 2017; Serrano-Velarde & Krücken, 2012). In addition, although the diffusion of management models is never straightforward (Guillén, 1994), with university leaders probably exposed to competing discourses about post-pandemic higher education, I suspect that this one—extreme neoliberalism—is gaining considerable airtime. After all, senior executives in higher education have cultivated close ties with the consulting industry, spending notable sums for their advice. Recall also that when Hayek (1949) encouraged economic libertarians to blueprint their own utopias, he fully understood that the word literally means "nowhere." The purpose is mainly to shift the discursive baseline in the desired direction, even if only slightly. In this case, putting an academic variant of platform capitalism on the agenda is enough. The hope is that time and the momentum caused by the pandemic will do the rest.

Legitimacy and the Profession Paradox

The presence of the consulting industry poses a specific problem for business schools, and management departments perhaps even more so. I term this a professional paradox. Unlike English or chemistry departments, business schools have built their expertise on an exclusive understanding of industry problems. In management departments, for example, professional legitimacy rests on practical and theoretical knowledge of topics such as change management, HRM, strategy, innovation, leadership, business analytics, and governance. However, with business consultants now key implementers of this knowledge in our profession, the discipline risks losing legitimacy in the eyes of students, university executives, and the general public. Rather than being masters of our own home on questions we profess preeminent insight about, external corporate advisors are holding sway.

This also resonates negatively with the mounting mandate to demonstrate "impact" in contemporary universities. Indeed, in Australasia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, impact case studies are often considered just as important—if not more so—than research publications (Audretsch, Belitski, Guerrero, & Siegel, 2022; Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016). So how can management schools claim that their research has meaningful impact when they themselves do not use their own in-house knowledge?

The loss of legitimacy that this professional paradox may fuel has considerable implications for business schools, reinforcing some of the recommendations made in the 16 consultancy reports discussed above. If business schools are no longer the seat of best-practice knowledge about accounting, business analytics, management, and cognate topics, does this not create an opportunity for alternative providers to step in? Indeed, this is exactly what the consulting reports have predicted will occur with the rise of digital learning platforms. According to Accenture (2021), traditional universities will soon be outmaneuvered by new market entrants, including Amazon, Google, and Microsoft, in addition to entrepreneurial start-ups, who will provide cheaper degrees and superior reputational capital. EY (2021a: 3) concurred: "in a world of 'work from anywhere,' people also want to 'learn from anywhere'—and new education platforms are rising to meet this demand." Compared to the contemporary business school, it is likely that business education platforms developed by Amazon and Microsoft would command greater creditability concerning management knowledge or impact in the eyes of students. Hence a profound irony: The trends that Accenture and EY anticipate—regarding new market entrants moving in on our territory—is partly precipitated by their very presence in business schools, as the professional legitimacy of its academics is eroded. This professional paradox might foreseeably promote the *deprofessionalization* of management education in business schools.

A PROPOSAL FOR RESISTING EXTREME NEOLIBERALISM

It is worrying that several of the initiatives celebrated in the pandemic reports are already evident in universities today, including big data performance metrics, centralized management structures, recasting students as customers, and so forth. However, I doubt that many academics—in the business school and beyond—would subscribe to the new and radical "smart campus" being sold to university leaders in these documents. I hope my theorization of extreme neoliberalism explains why. Is there anything we can do to prevent this techno-libertarian fantasy from becoming a teaching and learning reality? I suggest that there are three avenues of resistance available, and, *vis-à-vis* other schools in higher education, business school educators are uniquely situated to pursue them.

The first is to create our own utopian image to counter the one being proffered by the consulting industry. Indeed, Gümüsay and Reinecke (2022) recently urged management scholars to posit "real utopias" when researching troubling trends in business and society. With respect to higher education, there are precedents for doing so. In his influential essay "The University Without Condition," French philosopher Jacques Derrida (2002) argued that higher education has become so *conditional* (on research outputs, performance targets, student fees, government policy, private donors, etc.) that its original purpose has faded from view (which Derrida rooted in the Enlightenment project). Although not realizable in a strict sense, he suggested that an "unconditional" ideal of higher education should guide our struggles against corporatization:

> This university without conditions does not, in fact, exist, as we know only too well. Nevertheless, in principle and in conformity with its declared vocation, its professed essence, it should remain an ultimate place of critical resistance—and more than critical—to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation. (Derrida, 2002: 204)

The approach is uncompromising and has no time for half measures. Think here of Parker's (2018) call to "bulldoze" the business school and start afresh (see also Steyaert, Beyes, & Parker, 2016). One option in this respect is to develop alternative sources of expertise—Parker (2018) focused on *organizing*—eschewing traditional managerialism (that is now being colonized by the consulting industry in our own backyard). Critical Management Studies has advocated this for some time, arguing that graduates require more than technical skills but also a deep appreciation of the political, ethical, and sociological dimensions of business (see, e.g., Collinson & Tourish, 2017; Contu, 2009; Grey, 2002, 2004). Good management necessitates this as much as financial literacy or SWOT analyses (see also Chia & Holt, 2008). Importantly, it would be unlikely that KPMG or PwC could (or would want to) appropriate or commoditize such knowledge.

Further reasons make the business school a propitious setting for imagining such counterutopias. For example, I would wager that few other disciplines in universities are undergoing such in-depth soul searching about their purpose and impact on society as those in the business school. Is it a force for good or ill? Are we aiding and abetting wealth or income inequality, or questioning it? The growing discontent is reflected in animated discussions about how we might build more ethical and humane institutions (e.g., Columbo, 2022; Rintamäki & Alvesson, 2022; Spicer, Jaser, & Wiertz, 2021). The word *crisis* is closely connected to the ancient Greek notion of *kairos*, meaning those rare moments when a life-changing decision must be made. The outcome of that decision cannot be known in advance. Therefore, if the pandemic is indeed a "fork in the road," as EY (2021: 18) proclaimed, could we not turn the tables on extreme neoliberalism and choose another path? Not toward platform academic capitalism, but toward its very opposite?

Arguments for bulldozing and rebuilding the business school are refreshing. Counterutopianism permits us to forget expediency for a moment and think big, breaking free from our complicated entanglements in the status quo, and it certainly poses a strident counterpoint to the libertarian utopianism being promulgated by management consulting firms in the wake of COVID-19. However, there is one important weakness. If the compass has already drifted considerably toward academic capitalism, one wonders how receptive funding bodies, university councils, and senior managers will be to such demands. At your next faculty meeting, try suggesting that the business school should be transformed into an academic paradise-on-earth and you will see what I mean.

The second avenue of opposition sidesteps this speculative idealism and instead seeks to critically debunk the narrative being advanced by management consultants, revealing it as either inefficient, unworkable, or outright ridiculous. As Kirkpatrick, Sturdy, Reguera-Alvarado, Blanco-Oliver, and Veronesi (2019) similarly maintained in their critique of business consultants in public healthcare, data and factual reality are our weapons here. We have a distinct advantage in the business school regarding this avenue of resistance. For example, the adverse financial impact of the crisis is often evoked as the pretext for radical restructuring. This is then couched in highly quantitative jargon that few understand. Such economic illiteracy is useful for executives because it closes down debate. The tactic stalls, however, when dealing with highly trained actuarial science, accounting, finance, and econometric scholars (Martin-Sardesai, Guthrie,

& Tucker, 2020). I have witnessed it firsthand. If these academics can obtain the raw data (which are often withheld), the highly speculative conclusions being inferred from them are frequently shown to be spurious.

Similarly, factual evidence can be summoned to demonstrate the unrealistic learning models being advocated by consulting industry. For example, imagine having a wearable on your wrist connected to 1,500 individual "customers" in a large undergraduate program. Not only would it raise significant ethical concerns but teaching would be practically impossible. We can likewise puncture the claim that classes could be coordinated via on-demand digital platforms akin to Uber or YouTube. For sure, the reason why most employers in the post-industrial economy *have not* adopted Uber-like digital platforms is because the majority of jobs cannot be performed in this manner. They require conventional organizational structures. Fleming, Rhodes, and Hu (2019) showed this using a thought experiment whereby a business school employs teaching staff via an Uber app. Unsurprisingly, sheer chaos ensues. Microcredentials have been disputed for similar reasons (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021).

Like the consulting industry, big EdTech corporations have overhyped the practicality of digitalization in higher education too, something Teräs et al. (2020) linked to "learnification." This functions by promoting—and financially exploiting—the myth that universities are irreparably broken and technology is the only solution, irrespective of the significant everyday obstacles and "glitches" that will invariably rise. Unfortunately, this myth gained much kudos during the pandemic, which Teräs et al. (2020: 970; see also Mirrlees & Alvi, 2020) forcefully criticized:

> In the Covid-19 pandemic, the hypothesis of "broken education" offers an opportunity to ed-tech businesses to sell untested solutions which sometimes have little to do with proper teaching and learning philosophies … more disturbingly, some of these tools employ login requirements and tracking cookies to capture and gather data that can be monetized in the future. This is a rising business model in technoscientific capitalism, where the development of useful technological products and services is less important than the ownership and control of assetized personal data.

Similar questions have been raised about the intellectual property rights of teachers when their materials are controlled by online platforms. The issue was brought home by the 2021 scandal at Concordia University. After watching a prerecorded lecture by his professor, a student Googled the teacher and discovered an online memorial instead. The professor had died the previous year. Many insisted that Concordia University had taken learnification too far and were in morally dubious territory. As for students, surveys have challenged the suggestion that they no longer wish to attend campus (Mseleku, 2020; Xiao, 2021). Increasing numbers perceive online learning as inferior compared to face-to-face classes, complaining about the lack of interaction with instructors, tutors, and peers (Madrigal & Blevins, 2021). Perhaps this explains why so many institutions are now (partially, at least) returning to onsite teaching as the fundamental limitations of EdTech become apparent. Claims that the traditional campus is dead are clearly premature.

Critically debunking the consultant's utopia is essential for opposing it. By way of contrary and refuting evidence, it reveals the dark side of extreme neoliberalism and its proclivity for *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning. Further, this might carry more weight when launched from a business school context (rather than, say, political science) given that senior administrators often perceive us as wannabe consultants (Conn, 2019; Khurana, 2010). This avenue of resistance has one limitation, however. Karl Popper (1963) famously demonstrated that "utopian reason" is dangerous because it tends to render itself impervious to critical rebuttal. These flawless futures remain unrealized and thus difficult to contest with disconfirming information. As for the designers of these utopian plans, "you cannot prove to them that they are wrong" (Popper, 1963: 481). The perfect ideal "cannot be discussed, only proclaimed from the housetops. They do not call for the rational attitude of the impartial judge, but for the emotional attitude of the impassioned preacher" (Popper, 1963: 485).

This dearth of discussion and dialogue leads me to the third avenue for resisting extreme neoliberalism in universities. Due to the insular and opaque presence of consultants in higher education today, very few of their ideas are openly scrutinized or debated. The extremism is likely symptomatic of this insularity. In addition, because consultants are generally remote from everyday teaching delivery—like the university senior officials who hire them—they tend toward overidealized "solutions" that elide real-world implications. For this reason, simply debunking the discourse of extreme neoliberalism might not be enough if neither consultants nor university leaders are *listening*. Therefore, I suggest that we advance an *organizational* intervention with the aim of engendering more critical dialogue. Once again, knowledge generated by business schools specifically—particularly around corporate governance, organization theory, and business ethics—yields unique insights that are not readily available in other scholarly domains. This organizational approach to challenging consultocracy has three parts and would require considerably altering how university decision-makers deploy consultants in our midst.

The first is *transparency*. Most of us have no idea what role management consultants are playing in our institutions, even when we are directly impacted by them. A formal register should be established to identify the firm, the project, affected stakeholders, and the fees levied.

The second is *dialogue*. Concrete forums and committees made up of affected staff could allow these ideas to be debated and discussed in an interactive fashion. Unlike notorious "consultation exercises" (that simply communicate decisions already made), these forums should be deliberative and have vetoing powers.

The third is *accountability*. Exhorting universities to mimic Spotify and terminate most of their staff is utterly irresponsible—consulting firms can take such measures because they expect little blowback. There are several ways to address this issue. Universities might create public websites that identify the consulting firm and the nature of the project, and encourage faculty feedback (a similar idea was broached in Australia regarding consultants employed by governmental agencies [see Browne, 2021]). Perhaps a "star rating" system could even be utilized toward this end, where firms are rated or ranked by end users implementing their policies in the classroom (see also Sturdy, 2021). Furthermore, I see no reason why consulting reports like those analyzed in this essay cannot be mandated by universities to included critical feedback sections. That the opinions and experiences of academics hardly feature in these manifestos speaks volumes about the agenda being pursued in them.

My proposal will no doubt be condemned as hopelessly inefficient by the consulting industry, as a recipe for endless debate and inertia. Good business practice does not function this way, it will be said. But is that not precisely the problem? Core academic values like scientifically informed dialogue, collegiality, and self-governance are ultimately anathema to the mindset being disseminated in these reports. Even contrary factual evidence—which is integral to any informed policy decision—does not budge their worldview. Once entrenched, then, there is a danger that the modern university will no longer be a bastion for "the forceless force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1975: 108). Consultants are not entirely to blame on this count, however. They have been hired by clients, executives of the managerial university and their functionaries. One might even surmise that consultocracy in higher education today is symptomatic of a deeper tension between managers and academics that epitomizes contemporary higher education. Addressing that power relationship would undoubtedly be crucial in any challenge to extreme neoliberalism.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay is not to vilify management consultants; nor do I suggest that they have no role in higher education whatsoever. They may indeed offer services of a technical nature, for example, that they are best positioned to deliver. My concern is that a higher education consultocracy now commands a decisive influence over *policy* and *managerial* models, as the discourse of extreme neoliberalism intimates. The COVID-19 crisis is presented as an indisputable rationale for convincing university leaders that digital platforms, commercialization, performance metrics, "rightsizing" academic salaries, and other radical measures are unavoidable. Consultants now behave as our "shadow managers," supplying university decision-makers with intellectual schemas that impact our duties as educators. For example, casual employment contracts, teaching workload systems, performance targets, and HR grievance policies increasingly reflect a McKinsey point of view—and this is exactly what these firms were hired to do. To reiterate my earlier point, that consultants are shaping higher education—including the business school—basically reflects a deeper power relationship that has emerged between academics and management.

To an outside observer, business academics might seem like natural and faithful allies to KPMG, McKinsey, and PwC—and in some cases, they may be. However, this essay has tried to draw a more complex picture. That management educators and researchers are being managed by management "experts" is something of a paradox, as we have established. Significant implications follow regarding our professional legitimacy. Like me, I suspect that most readers working in the business school—even those who are sympathetic to the consulting industry—will be alarmed by the extreme proposals contained in these pandemic reports. However, there are alternatives. Indeed, the business school has a unique standpoint in higher education when it comes to challenging consulting discourses—including extreme neoliberalism—due to our critical appreciation of management and organizational processes and the profound conversation underway, in this journal and others, about what our ultimate mission is. The pandemic consulting dictum of "never let a good crisis go to waste" could thus be up for grabs. Is it possible to appropriate it and realize a very different kind of institution in the wake of this unprecedented disruption? Perhaps.

Finally, my essay has drawn on these consulting reports not as data, as but illustrations of trends that are currently afoot. My intention has been to raise awareness about this troubling development and question its inevitably. Nevertheless, more in-depth and systematic empirical investigation is now required. I hope that my essay will be helpful for such scholarship in the future.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1
Documents Analyzed

Company and Year	Publication Title	Document Type	Country of Origin	Empirical Research
Accenture, 2021	"Revolutionizing a hybrid Campus experience"	Research report	United States	Extensive case study of work with client Northeastern University
Deloitte, 2021	"The future of higher education"	Research report	Portugal	Data collated from various Deloitte studies of universities and the COVID-19 pandemic
EY, 2021a	"The peak of higher education: A new world for the university of the future"	Research report	Australia and New Zealand	Interviews with 32 university vice chancellors and "experts" from Australia and New Zealand
EY, 2020	"The new normal: Higher education in a post-COVID-19 world"	Research report	United States	TIAA survey of leaders at 14 four-year higher education institutions in the United States
KPMG, 2020a	"The future of higher education in a disruptive world"	Research report	Australia	International case study data derived from "KPMG connected enterprise for higher education" change management model
PwC, 2021a	"COVID-19 recovery and improvement: Locking in the benefits and overcoming the challenges"	Research report	United Kingdom	Interviews with 36 Chief Financial Officers in UK universities
PwC, 2021b	"Fit for the new normal: How Australia's higher education institutions might grow in the 2020s"	Research report	Australia	Data derived from "Managing change in Australian universities" client program
PwC, 2021c	"Future fit: Reshaping our higher education workforce"	Research report	Australia	Data derived from "Australian higher education workforce of the future" study commissioned by the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association
PwC, 2020	"Transforming higher education—the digital university"	Research report	United Kingdom	Case study data of client universities where PwC is a "change partner"
EY, 2021b	"COVID-19 brings forward demise of university campus"	Position paper	Australia and New Zealand	Data from report (EY, 2021a)
McKinsey, 2020	"Reimagining higher education in the United States"	Position paper	United States	Publicly available data, client case study, and online survey of 2,094 U.S.-based high school seniors in April 2020
McKinsey, 2021	"How to transform higher-education institutions for the long term"	Position paper	United States	Expert interviews and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System
KPMG, 2020b	"Cost disease in higher education: How can universities offset rising costs, create efficiencies and make productivity gains?"	Position paper	Australia	Secondary and publicly available data
Puckett et al., 2021	"Higher ed must go all in on digital"	Position paper	United States	BCG partnered with Google to survey and interview U.S. higher education leaders February–March 2021
Bain, 2021	"The last straw for US higher education—And a moment for reinvention"	Position paper	United States	Modeling based on NACUBO, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, and National Centre of Education Statistics
EY, 2022	"Are universities of the past still the future?"	Position paper	Australia	Data from report (EY, 2021a)