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‘Just get them over the line’: Neoliberalism and the execution of ‘excellence’

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Abstract

Higher Education institutions, at least in nominal ‘Western’ contexts, oversell a dressed-up version of ‘excellence’ to draw in students, but they have more firmly in their sight a vision of the commercial bottom line. This research study, firmly grounded in the author’s experience of postgraduate education, posits that the marketised, neoliberal conception of ‘excellence’ both covers a hidden truth that these institutions are content just to get learners ‘over the line’ and hides a more authentic, bottom-up conception of ‘excellence’ which appears when the voices of learners and educators are heard above the managerialist chatter and when teaching well is considered. The paper presents its review of the field as a critically evocative autoethnography, with the author positioned as a witness to the lexical slaughter of ‘excellence’, amongst other terms suborned by the neoliberalist academy.

Within its chorus of voices, it introduces the reflective critical incidents of three postgraduate supervisors or mentors telling of their realisations that their institutions are more interested in getting students ‘over the line’ in a timely fashion than in facilitating opportunities for authentic excellence. Methodologically, then, the study presents three narratives as evidence in a narrative enquiry embedded in the broader autoethnography, as is often the case in professional practice research. The paper is positioned on the cusp of COVID-19’s aftermath and suggests that higher education organisations are on track to miss the opportunities to begin dismantling neoliberal thought that the pandemic afforded. Instead, they condemn themselves to ‘mediocracy’ – rule by the mediocre churning out mediocrity under the guise of a shopfront of gaudy but vacuous ‘excellence’.

Hard times for higher education

Educators in higher education (HE) contexts in the 2020s are forced to toe (not tow) an ever more unpalatable line. This is the line where the learner and the educator's lived experience of 'excellence' meets what a neoliberalist would construe as *the bottom line*. In this context, the 'bottom line' is where managers who are forced to embody the ideology of 'just get them over the line' lurk, knowing that a sea of C-plusses is all it will take to ensure they meet their own bottom lines in performance, department, faculty reviews and (*bingo!*) Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The bottom line, I'd say, is where mediocrity dwells. Catalysing my exit from academia in Australia in 2016 because of my perception of the *mediocracy (sic)* of the sector, an article in *The Age* was headed 'Bottom line always at the top for neoliberalism' (*The Age*, 2016). Cajoled to get students 'over the line' in deference of the bell curve, I realised that the line was actually the bottom line, and how low a bar can you have?

This paper finds its gap and its line of enquiry from my professional practice as a postgraduate educator in Australia and New Zealand. My enquiry is supported by geopolitical thinkers such as Giroux (2009, 2014, 2017, 2019), who viewed neoliberalism as a wartime occupier of higher education; Barnett (2013), who (re)imagined the university; Collini (2012), who asked what universities are for and Fleming (2021) who, like myself (Andrew, 2022), has seen the dark side of the underbelly of the modern (read neoliberal) university. This paper, largely a critical content review, takes critical evocative autoethnography as its method of presentation, incorporating other supervisors' narrative enquiries. I bring in these short mentor narratives, vignettes really, into the evidence space to support the evocative autoethnography and provide some instances of the execution of excellence in practice. I suggest that mediocrity, and not excellence, is the new bottom line of the neoliberal university, despite the expectations of 'excellence' HE institutions sell in Western nations (Moore et al., 2017).

Such institutions exploit, I think, dishonesty and a perception gap between measured 'excellence' and what seems to potential learners to be a more authentic educative excellence. This gap was only amplified by HE institutions' scrambling back after the COVID-19 lockdowns of the early 2020s, using the neoliberalist boost to train compliant workers (Waller & Wrenn, 2023). Measured excellence is seen as a *smoke screen* for driving neoliberalist sectoral change (Cui et al., 2021). I posit that a more bottom-up but robust consideration of what facilitation, mentoring or teaching well could look like in higher educational contexts in the 2020s (see Brookfield et al., 2023) counterbalances to some extent neoliberal biases inherent in the hegemonic concept of 'excellence' and its adjunct, 'quality assurance'.

The unreality of excellence

Excellence in education is not a commodity that can be bought and sold and made available to all at will. Instruments evaluating excellence in any context will always be vested and never neutral, as with the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016. We may see agenda-pushing or non-neutrality in Aotearoa/New Zealand's National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, Australia's ERA (Excellence in Research Australia) or any Vice Chancellor's excellence award in any given year, the annual academic Oscars. Then there are the transformative Academic Excellence Initiatives (AEIs) in elite universities in nine non-Anglophone countries detailed in *Academic star wars* (Yudkevich et al., 2023). The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EAQAHE; Brusoni et al., 2004), offering a varied discussion of excellence, emphasised the vested nature of 'excellence': "influence of expectations and priorities from different groups can be easily detected when statements about excellence in higher education are drafted" (p. 20). It also admitted that excellence must have quantitative and qualitative parameters and objective and subjective indicators. There is a strong sense that standards-based excellence still dominates the discourse despite the lexical concession. Their claim that excellence is "a reality" and that there is a different definition for each reality (p. 21) brings metaphysical concern for what *reality* is back to the table. One reality, like one size, one 'excellence', can never fit all.

Micromanaged evaluation aside, excellence in education can be seen as the result of the experience, passion and experience of educators and their own ability to both portray this and pass it on (Wood & Su, 2017). This is a more authentic excellence because it comes from a deep-seated place of lived educator experience, motivated by a desire to transform lives and communities (Carpenter & Ker, 2017). The voices of these educators are, as Cui et al. (2021) have shown, too often ignored in top-down neoliberalist conceptualisations of excellence inscribed in Higher Education, such as the TEF. Canning (2019) labelled the policy of the TEF a *hyperreal simulacrum* because it does not reflect teaching excellence but a value-for-money, bottom-line agenda related to graduate employability, another contested subject. In other words, it is inauthentic excellence. Tinto (2017) suggested that viewing excellence through the eyes of learners might improve retention rates.

Authentic educative excellence is experienced, situated, socially enacted and co-constructed in practice. It moves beyond teaching excellence in that the learner's experience determines the authenticity. Their interfaces are the educator, the educator's team, the curriculum, including the assessment process and its transparency and perceived fairness, and any media by which communication about enrolment, programme, assessments and results travel, such as learning management systems and administrative emails. Skelton (2005) notably proposed four dimensions of teaching excellence: traditional, as in sage-on-stage inculcation; performative, where learners are seen as returns on investment and defined by standardised or market-driven quantitative criteria; psychologised, emphasising theory of learning and teaching; and, finally, critical, where understandings of teaching excellence link it to the emancipatory powers of freedom, justice and self-empowerment.

Beyond the conventional and the measurable, teaching excellence is largely the result of educators' enthusiasm/inspiration of those they co-negotiate educational goals with:

the learners. It is often the educator's passion which learners remember long term – call it *Goodbye Mr Chips* syndrome if you will (after Hilton, 1933). What the learners themselves bring to the excellence table matters, too. For instance, such groups as self-motivated and adult learners may embody genetic dispositions and learned traits that may facilitate the co-construction of excellence in their application, work and performance. In conscious danger of bankrupting Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital (1986), I suggest they may have the *habitus* ("socially constituted cognitive capacity"; p. 27) of an excellent learner, just as educators may embody a *habitus* for excellence as educators.

"Teaching excellence" is obviously a contested term (Skelton, 2004), inflected by a regulatory voice invested in setting fees and marketing plans pivoting on "student education" and "student choices" as much as being a mechanism for the imperatives of teaching excellence and the quality assurance that implies (Gunn, 2018; Moore et al., 2017; Owens et al., 2021). A key issue in top-down configurations of excellence in education is its minimalisation of collaboration with the teacher/mentor voice. Wood and Su (2017) were thus motivated to create an empirical yet nuanced study of excellence based on 16 teacher voices with a focus on practice, a methodological principle mirrored by Goode (2023). She writes:

> If organisational leaders were asked how they measure the impact of teaching, they would probably refer to key performance indicators, such as retention rates, completion levels, and destination surveys… However, I would argue that, while those measures are certainly important, if learners were asked the same question, these elements would not come into play (p. 1).

Wood and Su (2017) demonstrate that cross- and trans-institutional shared collaboration between educators and learners epitomises excellence in teaching in educators' views. Further, Wood and Su (2017) and Goode (2023) show, amongst other things, that excellent educators are given opportunities to nurture their excellence through research, so that the research: practice nexus becomes a mutually fruitful space. What makes research excellent is subject to scrutiny, too. Tracey (2010), for instance, offered the eight 'big-tent' criteria for judging excellence in qualitative research: worthy topic; rich rigour; sincerity; credibility; resonance; significant contribution; ethical; and meaningful coherence. If collaboration and applied research are supported, the institutions where they occur might more successfully become facilitators and mediators of learning. Thus, they are more likely to afford the features of authentic excellence that support teaching and learning.

It is worth adding that a current report in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Elias & O'Leary, 2023) emphasises that few people rate the performance of higher education providers as 'excellent' (only 9%) with a majority plumping for 'good' (41%) or 'very good' (31%) and 19% rating negatively. In an otherwise colonised critique of excellence, Grifoll (2016), a key architect of EAQAHE in 2014, ultimately understands excellence "as a link between innovation and the aim of moving up to better societies" (p. 96). This fits the view that a more authentic excellence lies in what is fresh and distinctive about practice and in what may be genuinely transformative.

The vacuousness of excellence

The discursive peddling of excellence as part of a commodity package goes back years and its ghost haunts us post-COVID. Thirty-six years ago, Timar and Kirp (1988) argued that centralised over-regulation kneecapped true innovation and change in the national quest for educational excellence in the United States. In this quest, rules, they write, "cannot compel teachers to be more caring" and cannot "require… administrators be fair and just" (p. 39). Thirty-five years ago, Woudstra and Powell (1989) described those responsible for the appearance of excellence in Higher Education in neoliberalist terms of *competitive advantage*. They wrote that when the services of highly competent academics and tutors, registry staff, student advisors, and counsellors combine, a unique bond is formed between the university and its learners. This unique bond, they argue, becomes a differentiating *competitive advantage* when the institution subscribes to a vision of quality, support, service, and, of course, consequently, 'excellence'.

Collini (2012) identifies the 'vacuity' associated with 'excellence' used in such contexts of raising standards and improving quality. Pointing to the impossibility of the ever-more exponential growth curve, he writes: "Vacuity is… rendered more vacuous still by the requirement that the 'excellent' must become 'yet more excellent'" (p. 109). Trying to quantify the non-scalable concept of excellence is logically fallacious. Moore et al. (2017) saw quantified excellence as fetishised in educational sloganeering: "Excellence R Us." Clegg (2007) captures the oxymoronic nature of quantifying and scaling excellence:

> Excellence has become ubiquitous as a popular slogan, indeed the oxymoron 'excellence comes as standard' has thrown off its ironic resonance and is now routinely used to promote an astonishing variety of goods (p. 91).

There will inevitably be factors beyond the agency of the stakeholders who play a role in experienced authentic excellence, as epitomised by COVID-19 and its lockdowns, but how these parties perform and offer support during the unforeseen is also a measure of their commitment to excellence. Key themes about crisis leadership during COVID are the need for clear communication, the quality of compassion (Tan, 2022) and creating spaces where resilience may flourish (Andrew et al., 2020; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). It is cooperation, not competition, that breeds sustainable resilience (van Staveren, 2023).

The lexical slaughter of excellence

Henri Giroux, the most prolific opponent of the neoliberalised university, wrote scathingly of the commodification of excellence as part of a hard-sell package: "the appeal to excellence… functions like a corporate logo, hyping

efficiency while denuding critical thought and scholarship of any intellectual, civic, and political substance" (2009, p. 673). Barnett (2013) regarded exercises of university (re) branding and as forms of imaginative, ideological and ethical constraint, noting they are marked by the hijacking of terms such as 'flexible delivery', 'lifelong learning' and a generic branded form of 'excellence'. These, Katz (2015) argues, are "equivocations, neologisms and business-oriented euphemisms" (p. 557). While marketisation might have led to practical improvement, Katz argues, it instead fumbles into imaginative paucity. Katz (2015) also notes the neoliberal university found itself constrained by 'Darwinian' competition towards what Barnett had called 'global "excellence' (2013, p. 58). This is the lexical slaughter Watson (2003) identified.

Katz (2015) is one of many authors whose thesis is that neoliberal, marketised and corporate language usurps and distorts the primary purpose of higher education to empower future generations with applied problem-solving strategies, made rigorous via reflective and critical thinking skills. Katz cites Swinburne University in Melbourne, an organisation I left in the mid-2010s because of its mission slip during a discussion of 'behaviours', ways members of the body politic were expected to behave and hence be judged. When a colleague suggested *compassion* had a role to play in our interactions with learners and colleagues, he was severely laughed down. I stood with Tan (2022): "To be a compassionate, inclusive, and mindful educator, it is important for us to be authentic in the positioning of our teaching values and interactions" (p. 157). This dissing of compassion was, for me what led to the critical moment, the realisation of *mediocracy*, I mentioned at the start. In Swinburne's marketing, Katz (2015), too, saw instances of shallow corporate-speak:

> Instances of Zombilingo may be found in the 'Swinburne Behaviours', where staff assessment criteria encourage employees to 'support, empower and encourage others to achieve excellence'; perhaps because as previously mentioned, 'together we can make a difference' (p. 56).

What repels me here is the usurping of the social mission of higher education, *making a difference*, to the marketised discourse of excellence. The pretence for collegiality and community is buried in a discourse no longer of shared mission or values but individual behaviours. Lorenz (2012) warned us about the slippage of language in new public management, the handmaiden of neoliberalism: "New public management… parasitises the everyday meanings of (its) concepts... and simultaneously perverts all their original meanings" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 600). The "bullshitter", Lorenz (2012) tells us, "is only interested in effects and does not necessarily believe in what [they] state [themselves]" (p. 560). Analysing documentation in a Dutch context, he writes that a particular variety of this bullshit-lingo is "excellencespeak" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 626).

When Katz (2015) reminded me of organisational behaviours, the memory brought to mind the Pavlovian zombification of higher education, with automaton inhabitants barred from autonomy, free speech and agency and forced into corporatised models of being, speaking and behaving, often called being a 'team player', like the human outputs Waller and Wrenn (2023) identify. Team players are "robust, resilient, responsive, flexible, innovative, and adaptable" (Gillies, 2011, p. 210), to namecheck other terms colonised by zombilingo. Team players play the game of excellence within what Cheek (2017) labelled the ratings rodeo. Further, as Saunders and Ramírez (2017) remind us, "since excellence is a measure of a thing, and since everything in post-secondary education is committed to excellence, everything must be measured" (p. 399). *Excellence R Us*.

Unfortunately, criteria for audit, performance and measurement are also colonised by corporatisation and its zombilingo about 'quality'. Lorenz (2012) noted that "the paradoxical and disastrous effect of the introduction of NPM, with its self-referential notions of accountability and quality, is that someone can be an excellent teacher and researcher and at the same time be assessed as poor by the QA system" (p. 619). Those in the neoliberalist, [New Public Management] NPM and zombilingo camps, clearly have a different construct of quality and its manifestation, excellence. Lorenz (pp. 618-619) writes:

> Quality … is concentrated upon systems and processes rather than outcomes. [Quality Assurance] QA is built on the assumption that any properly constituted organization should be based around a system of auditing systems and processes… The product of a QA system is therefore quality assured by definition—without necessarily guaranteeing its excellence or fitness for use.

The zombies are both those brainwashed, brain-*eaten* even, by zombilingo, and those forced to conform to its behaviours, often against their ethical well-being (Ryan, 2012), becoming anxious "nobodies" (Fleming, 2021, p. 116). Unsurprisingly, a zombie university (Smythe, 2017) produces zombie students (Ryan, 2012; Smythe, 2017). They are zombified because, with the failure of liberal arts and science ideology, they are made into work-ready agents of the market (Waller & Wrenn, 2023), which in zombilingo is often called 'social mobility' (Beighton, 2018). 'Work-readiness' as defined by the voices of employers in the echo Chamber of Commerce, usually means 'ready to be put to work in the money-making machine'. Automatons in service of the bottom line.

Considering that, 'excellence' is as non-neutral a term as 'quality' (Giroux, 2009), the neoliberalised "performative worker" is, as Ball (2003) wrote, "a promiscuous self, an enterprising self, with a passion for excellence" (p. 16). Whose excellence, we ask? That of the organisation, that of the performing educator or even that of their learners striving to get over the line or, perhaps, to find excellence. The performative, promiscuous worker is the brainwashed zombie, striving, with plenty of help from the neoliberal system, by the alpha in the "academic star complex" (Fleming, 2021, p. 116) in *Academic star wars* (Yudkevitch et al, 2023).

Ball (2003) is just one scholar who shows us that this promiscuity takes the form of wantonly reaping grants and outputs to release the university from obligations to fund research internally via salary; and to reward those who contribute most to such regimes as Australia's ERA (Australian government, Excellence in Research for Australia, 2023). Seen this way, research, under which higher degree research is subsumed, is an exercise of a *homo oeconomicus* identity than any authentic conception of 'excellence' or making a critical or transformative difference (Skea, 2021). As Roberts (2007) wrote of the New Zealand context: "Research is a competitive, self-interested, instrumental, outputs-oriented process" (p. 362). Roberts (2007) describes this species of 'performative' zombie with a reference to nationalism that reminds us of Swinburne's catch-call that we can make a difference together.

> The ideal citizen… is a sophisticated, competitive, innovative and enthusiastic participant in the global economy, ever ready to apply what he or she knows (from research or other activities) to the goal of creating… a "prosperous and confident nation" (p. 363).

The neoliberalised subject is one that has bought into the rhetoric tying the work of the individual/*homo oeconomicus* to the patriotic 'national' (read *organisational*) good. But surely such individuals are docile, performing others' edicts? Elsewhere, Foucault (2008) defines the docile body as one that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. While I am one who sees the assimilated *homo oeconomicus* as a zero, there are many who would praise the docile hero.

The timeliness of excellence

One of the greatest impacts on postgraduate learners during the COVID period was on their timelines. The literature on postgraduate supervision has long emphasised the importance of timely completion as the most crucial outcome of the interplay of the three parties. Because time is money, a study of research supervision in Kenya used the word 'timely' 15 times (Noel et al., 2021); even in developing countries, it is priority number one. Yet educators know the virtue of timeliness emerges from the fortunate concatenation of a mentor's skill in co-negotiating, knowing, and managing processes, a learner's determination and discipline and the host organisation's ability to offer an environment that supports and ideally supplements both these things. It is a multi-stakeholder endeavour, but keeping to time is a responsibility allocated to the supervisor. Timeliness, though, primarily thrives with a preventative, interventionist and empathetic response from the supervisor or mentor (Manathunga, 2007) and not a punitive, top-down looming timeline. This ability, a major contributor to postgraduate educative excellence, is one of many in the toolbox of a good supervisor or a passionate mentor.

The current study of excellence

This study is a work of professional practice and not traditional research. As such, it is grounded in real-world problems identified within the author's workplaces (Costley & Lester, 2012). The problem is how educators grapple with an ethos of 'just get them over the line' within a culture that professes a mission statement including a notion of excellence, albeit a two- (or even multi-) headed one. The gap it fills is not the result of an extensive literature search to find something relatively unexplored, but an observed and experienced disjuncture in real life informed by the Zeitgeist of literature critiquing neoliberalism. The gap I explore is that between the rhetorical, marketised concept of 'excellence' in higher education and the on-the-ground, gritty, real-world experiences of those closest to the phenomenon being explored.

This study is interpretivist: I re-present and, hence, interpret the experiential and human components. This interpretivist orientation evidences itself in my use of language, the recreation of mentor consciousnesses and the question of invested, privileged power perspectives in discourse about excellence. The method of evidence collection here is elicited narrative in response to the cue: *Share a narrative illustrating how you came to realise something important about what good mentoring looks like*. New mentors were asked to share stories of critical moments in their learning journeys. In the broader evidence set, I used thematic analysis, and as I did notice, the cliché *gets them over the line* used in three stories; this spurred my interest. The stories were recast to dilute/fictionalise identifiable references and to crystallise mentors' realisations about how excellence plays a pivotal role in their narratives. The participants agreed that I could use edited versions of their stories, substituted with critical incidents from my own story, bringing critically reflexive autoethnography to my entire paper (Ellis & Bochner, 2001). Safeguarding researchers' relationships with collegial mentors is an ethical issue applied seriously (Fulton & Costley, 2019). This study is ethics approved, Otago Polytechnic: HRE15-173.

In this paper and in my own professional practice, these stakeholders are postgraduate degree candidates and their mentors, and their experiences contain a shadow of the third responsible party: the host organisation. This paper applies tenets of narrative enquiry in that its 'truth' claim derives from the authentic stories of the lived experience of those close to the phenomenon over time, understanding how the individual and the culture are interconnected (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). In my evocative autoethnography, I situate myself as a researcher within my study, often integrated with other ethnographic participants (Blanco, 2012). As in Hil's (2012) work, the social reality of the narrator presents a perspective on the object of enquiry, excellence, and this is what, in part, makes it critical. Clandinin (2013) claims narrative operates in the middle of an experience and should heed participants' temporality, sociality and place. The three narratives presented here are, thus, comparable and representative but hardly comprehensive.

The stories themselves comprise evidence (formerly known as data) and reflect and refract a speculative 'truth' set within a framework of my curation. Clearly, I write and curate from the closeness of my experience that Bochner and Ellis's (2016) legacy affords, and accordingly, I link "evocative personal narrative to cultural criticism" (p. 25) but narrow my scope to an examination of excellence. The phenomena I examine in this study are expressed in the title: the 'execution' of excellence, both in terms of how it is carried out procedurally, and in terms of how it is murdered by lexical slaughter. By way of a disclaimer, I need to say that no managers were harmed in the creation of this artefact, and their bottom lines remained untouched. The term 'excellence,' however, was. I now present the three professional masters/doctorate mentor narratives, each detailing a critical incident in their practice that led to a realisation of the nature of excellence.

Narratives of (not) excellence

Narrative 1

I inherited a 'legacy' Masters learner whose research work had involved implementing a [redacted] as a method of thinking about and planning a cultural event within the practicum of an undergraduate culinary arts programme. A lockdown in the weeks prior to the [redacted] stunted the potential of this approach, but the practical plans were underway and the event, which was the beating heart of the phenomenon under investigation, went ahead. Luckily, the date of this cultural event occurred after the end of the projected lockdown and for once lockdown was not postponed.

The learner had to rely on a retrospective, remembered narration. Now, looking back, we can see she could have/should have interviewed those learners involved in the process of planning to ensure a solid, time- and event-specific data set was preserved, but the existing ethics application did not cover such an approach and the committee had gone into COVID-inflicted recess. Hindsight is a fine thing, and when the work came to its final oral assessment, several other lockdowns later, the assessors were full of the might haves and could haves which, under normal circumstances, might have seemed reasonable. The candidate had done her best with severely limited retrospective case study data but had not been able to muster an autoethnographic approach since that also required forward-looking ethics. She grounded her work in the theory informing her original approach, but it was clear now that it did not fit epistemologically. The lack of fortune continued. Her supervisor was forced to resign. Her thesis was ready for review, but its methodology was mismatched to her proposal and her entire research direction had turned 360 degrees. Her reviewer told her that her work lacked rigour and methodological soundness, and this is the point at which I inherited her with a memo to please 'get her over the line'.

It was clear that her groundedness in her subject and practice was strong; that her passion had been burning, and that her initial planning had resulted in a viable and methodologically logical approach to addressing her enquiry. She strove for the 'excellence' that Hegarty (2011) relates to critical reflection and cultural imagination in culinary arts education. But she had not prepared for the unknown. Although she had generated findings, discussed them and raised recommendations, the enquiry was, it was now evident, built upon sand. How did it get to this stage without anyone realising? I felt that a student whose natural inclination was towards excellence was being pushed just to pass, no more, because of forces beyond the control of herself, her mentors or indeed, the faculty. These forces were the demons of timeliness and its adjunct economic and KPI flow-ons. I felt that no matter how well I supported this candidate, she was caught between an advertised, promised excellence and the likelihood of achieving mediocrity. Her getting a mere pass was reflective of neither the organisation's promise nor the promise she had shown. As for myself as a stand-in, there was no possibility of achieving excellence; I was unable to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, especially under time pressures. Reluctantly, she was eventually taken over the line, but it could have, should have, been so much better.

Narrative 2

The second time my professional practice doctoral learner presented her thesis, our research management expressed the need for her to 'get over the line', that mythic liminal space in the borderlands where three examiners converge like confluent rivers. Hers had been a complex journey through rough landscapes of multiple COVID lockdowns and even the cessation of educational establishments in which her study, and certainly her evidence gathering, was grounded. She had engaged with literature and methodology and created an acceptable proposal with the potential for excellence. Along with COVID, life happened. Invited participants, initially keen, withdrew as their circumstances had changed, and due to the pandemic, they were no longer in the zone. Diverted by the pandemic, people were unable to dedicate time or energy to be interviewed even via Zoom. She pivoted and extended the sample participant group – twice – keeping checks with the ethics advisor as she did. Perhaps resilience and resourcefulness are true hallmarks of excellence in a time of unforeseen crisis? Perhaps creating a compelling narrative of the experienced messiness of research-in-practice was itself an artefact of doctoral rigour?

Data collection was suspended indefinitely, and other parts of the thesis were written. A professional as well as a candidate, she was made redundant, and the context of her enquiry disappeared. A year on, she assumed work elsewhere, so her work context changed. In the end, the data was eclectic but still told a strong, if messy, practice story, but, perhaps, was no longer totally congruent with what she had written. The final work was on time and authentic in terms of lived practice and evidence of critical reflection, but the choppy methodology and thinner-than-hoped-for findings narratives seemed mediocre to examiners. There was no space in the (externally quality assured) assessment criteria to assess for resilience and resourcefulness, and no possibility to reframe the work as a COVID-era best effort. There was a perceived line, and it wasn't over it yet.

Where the energies of learner and mentors had been strong, the thesis was the best it could be and, if treated as a portfolio, addressed the graduate outcomes competently. Not helped by MS Teams outages, the oral assessment seemed confrontational, and the candidate was intimidated into underperformance rather than supported to success. A new thesis was requested with additional data, but with all the time and energy expended, it was a tall order, and the data-gathering boat had sailed. What would have been and could have been potentially excellent was consigned to mediocrity. However, we need to reflect on where the mediocrity truly lies in this narrative and understand the network of factors behind the execution of excellence.

Narrative 3

There was considerable difference between my perception, in my role as mentor, of my master's learners' success and that of the three assessors in the final oral examination. I had thought the work was sound, but not spectacular; thorough, but not as original a contribution to scholarship as it could have been. I wonder about the impact of multiple lockdowns and natural disasters on the data collection environment and on the workplace of this learner, which was, literally, washed away in a deluge following a major climate event. When learners are on the clock, and when they have clocked up every last possible extension, and life happens, and happens again, and happens repeatedly, I wonder how much that happened was within the learner's locus of control. Is there room for empathy as a component of excellence, or is keeping to time everything?

I wonder about the extent to which circumstances limited my learner's access to achieving a grade of excellence. I know this learner did have the appetite and enthusiasm for excellence, at least initially, but they lost heart because of the brickbats fate chucked, and then they received letters about the imminent ending date of enrolment. There was a hasty assemblage of materials, including data narratives from interviews long delayed, then relayed by Teams, whose transcriptions were a mangled mess. The final work was repeatedly edited but still exhibited signs of haste. The learner's final assessment viva was well-communicated, and the final assessment report was positive, but their final mark told them they were mediocre. The potential for excellence promised by the organisation, the programme and the mentors, who were, after all, close to the work, was countermanded by a score that said *no PhD enrolment prospect for you, sucker.*

Discussion

These are three of many such narratives that demonstrate how the pandemic exposed the vacuity of higher education's promises of excellence within a neoliberalist ideology. The ideology has proven itself lacking in resilience and adaptation to change and void of the compassion that we might have thought a pandemic might have emphasised. The discourse of just getting learners over the line (or not, as in Narrative 2) is the utterance of those colonised by a neoliberalist culture forced to accept that mediocrity will do. The facts that the stage was set for potential excellence, but that managerialism proved inflexible in the face of the unforeseen, indicate that the higher education organisations did not serve their learners with the excellence they might have expected. There were opportunities for the exercise of compassion, for refiguring assessment events impacted adversely by COVID in the name of natural justice and for seeing past the weaknesses occasioned by circumstances beyond the agency of either educator or learner. They are stories of excellence denied by the neoliberalist knee-jerk factors of timeliness and adherence to process.

Authentic excellence is a project of teamwork and includes mentorly passion and experience but its existence falters when every relationship in the team and beyond is, in Giroux's words, "ultimately judged in bottom-line, cost-effective terms" (2009, p. 673). All three stories may have played out more positively into spaces of authentic excellence without such ideological constraints as time always being money. There are cases where the exercise of compassion may sometimes lead us closer to excellence, thereby achieving more social and cultural capital in the long run. Looming over these narratives is a master narrative of COVID-resistant neoliberalism. Giroux (2009, p. 670) relates Leopold's (2007) conception of the entrepreneurial professor: educators must be trained "to watch the bottom line" and attend to principles of finance, management, marketing and brand identity in the common quest of a high-quality product, namely new knowledge. Watching that bottom line by merely getting learners over the line leads to mediocrity and nowhere near a high-quality product. This may be a management function, but it is not that of the educator and won't be embraced by the learner.

Conclusion

This study has moved from the macrocosm of HE internationally, where the slippery, contested concept of 'excellence' has been hijacked and occupied by vested, particularly neoliberalist, interests, to three micro-narratives demonstrating how powerful exponents of *mediocracy* limited learner and educator access to authentic excellence in the wake of the COVID era. Apart from extending the finish line and improving assessment processes for those approaching it, there are other hopeful possibilities to mitigate against future mediocre zombiedom in the assessment of HE degrees. Regarding the university 'world' specifically, Hil (2012) suggested we must "routinely reframe language by referring to... community, public education, students rather than consumers, dialogue and debate rather than inputs outputs and impacts" (2012, p. 217). This may be achieved by "do[ing] away with intrusive monitoring and subsequent zombification of academics" and affording "a return to community, collegiality, fun, soul, and passion" (2012, p. 209). Hil advocates, in other words, authentic excellence, not neoliberal excellencespeak, and a culture of community over *homo oeconomicus*. That was in 2012, and in 2022, Hil (et al.) thought COVID might have catalysed change, at least in Australian public universities, but it has not yet.

Relanguaging to reauthenticate excellence away from *Excellence R Us* (Moore, et al., 2017) is one thing, but there is a need, too, to provide an impetus for creativity and criticality to abate what Beighton (2018) called *catatonia*, which echoes the vacuity Collini (2012) saw in neoliberalist discourses of excellence. As far back as 2008, Clegg (2008) had argued for the application of creative and critical life force, *Eros*, to HE as a counter to neoliberal catatonics. It is akin to what Tan (2022, p. 158) sees as "mindsight, attentive love, and storytelling", which are components of authentic excellence. Through such humanist and posthumanistic approaches, emancipation from the hemmed-in non-human logic of neoliberalism might open spaces for agency, authentic resilience, shared stories and fresh possibility. Reinvesting in a bottom-up approach can be as simple as reconsidering what teaching well looks like and ensuring that professional development policies support strengthening cultures' research: practice nexus and collaborative opportunities. A reflective, experience-led, democratised approach based on praxis enquiry and incorporating critical thinking characterises leadership in HE teaching (Brookfield et al., 2023). Re-establishing the educator as the leader of excellence and not an entrepreneurial professor enables teacher agency as an act of resisting neoliberalism. It goes some way to reframing educator agency and affording authentic excellence, viewing it as social and cultural capital and not just a fraction of the bottom line.

What HE failed to reframe was the cockroach hegemony of neoliberalism (Cerny, 2010) and the leadership model needed in such uncertain times (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). Mirowki's fearful 2013 thesis about the undeath of neoliberalism in *Never let a good crisis go to waste* is transpiring, as Fleming et al. (2021) insinuate. It is embedded (Cerny, 2010). It is democracy's nemesis (Giroux, 2009). COVID appeared to offer a promising sea change away from the neoliberal (for example, Connell, 2019; Healey & Barish, 2019; Andrew et al., 2020; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). Fleming (2021) articulated the hope colourfully: "beleaguered by managerial-bloat, business bullshit and a COVID-compromised economic environment, the idea of the modern university may soon come to an end" (p. 19) but admits the pandemic focussed "ugly truths" (Fleming et al., 2021, p. 111). However, as Garrick (2014) had written: "alarmingly, we so often appear to return to 'business as usual', as if nothing had really happened… rapacious corporate greed, avarice and corruption lurk ever close to the surface" (pp. 151-152). Thus, the bottom line is still at the top for HE's colonisation by neoliberalism. So far, HE has missed the chance to implement the change-oriented reflections, hopeful thoughts, emancipatory actions and insightful research of many during this period (Fleming et al., 2021) and set in motion a change strategy step-by-step to leave neoliberalism behind.

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