

## ***Reframing relationships between private edtech companies and universities for digital education provision***

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### **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted universities worldwide to accelerate their moves towards increasing use of digital technologies to deliver teaching in remote and online forms. For some universities this meant increasing their internal capacity to support staff and students to teach and learn online, while for many more this has meant forming relationships with educational technology companies to provide necessary support, infrastructure, technologies. It is likely that universities have used a combination of strategies in emergency modes. However, even prior to the pandemic, universities had been engaged with experiments in higher education “market-making” whereby due to imperatives such as austerity and massification some universities have considered online and digital education as opportunities for income generation through the ability of online education to reach new markets of students. The relationships between universities and online programme management companies, known as OPMs, is one area of fruitful empirical research which sheds light on the particular forms of market-making with a wide range of possible forms including unbundling as well as other types of business arrangements including seeing rentiership as a way of extracting value from educational data and activities. Focussing on the role of private companies specialising in creating and selling educational technologies as shaping higher education, we explore how critical approaches to understanding the entanglement of technologies and social systems such as higher education can provide counter narratives to instrumentalist and essentialist approaches that seek to impose particular types of imaginaries for universities.

Close-up research theorised to take account of the socio-materiality of digital technologies and the types of assemblages that form can offer a more nuanced way of understanding the role of how the digital is being enacted in particular contexts. In the light of the Covid-19 pandemic it is more important than ever to understand the impacts of digital technologies as socio-material assemblages with forms of distributed agency including different actors, tools and technologies. While the dominant imaginary is often decontextualized and instrumentalist, critical theories can go some way to impact on the way digital technologies are spoken about and enacted at institutional levels. This could both contribute to and be the outcome of different sorts of research agendas and research questions. This in turn may inform policy and practice within institutions and better inform staff who are and will be increasingly required to engage with the market making overtures of private companies.

### **Keywords**

Edtech, marketisation, socio-materialism, university futures, unbundling.