

Article

The Neoliberal University in Ireland: Institutional Bullying by Another Name?

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Abstract: New managerialism and the pervasive neoliberalisation of universities is by now a well-established phenomenon. Commentaries explore the political and economic drivers and effects of neoliberal ideology, and critique the impact on higher education and academic work. The impact on the health and well-being of academic staff has had less attention, and it is to that we turn in this paper. Much academic interest in neoliberalism stems from the UK, Australia and the United States. We draw particularly on studies of public Irish universities, where neoliberalism, now well entrenched, but something of a late-comer to the new public management party, is making its presence felt. This conceptual paper explores the concept of neoliberalism in higher education, arguing that the policies and practices of new public management as exercised in universities are a form of bullying; what we term institutional bullying. The authors are researchers of workplace culture, workplace bullying and incivility. Irish universities are increasingly challenged in delivering the International Labour Organisation (ILO) principles of decent work, i.e., dignity, equity, fair income and safe working conditions. They have become exposed in terms of gender imbalance in senior positions, precariat workforce, excessive workload and diminishing levels of control. Irish universities are suffering in terms of both the health and well-being of staff and organisational vibrancy. The authors conclude by cautioning against potential neoliberal intensification as universities grapple with the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper reviews neoliberalism in higher education and concludes with insight as to how the current pandemic could act as a necessary catalyst to stem the tide and ‘call out’ bullying at the institutional level.

Keywords: neoliberalism; new public management; universities; institutional bullying



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1. Introduction

Neoliberalism is an ideology and policy model that advocates free trade and market competition, with minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs. It is underpinned by the values of corporate power [1] and is characterised by unwavering confidence in economic rationality [2]. Such is the belief in this market-driven fundamentalism; it has been applied as a solution to problems (real or imagined) in sectors previously predicated on existing solely for public good. Neoliberal policy, including deregulation, privatisation, outsourcing and increases in competition in public services, is now ubiquitous in the policy portfolios of many administrations and is no longer limited to right-wing governments [3]. An unassailable conviction about the virtues of capitalism, necessitating untrammelled competition and incentivisation is at the heart of neoliberal thinking [ibid.].

Neoliberal discourse has gained momentum, becoming widely adopted relatively uncritically, as observed by Monbiot: “So pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognise it as an ideology. We appear to accept the proposition that this utopian, millenarian faith describes a neutral force; a kind of biological law, like Darwin’s theory of evolution” [4] (p. 1).

The ‘apparent logic’ that everything in the end is monetised and the ‘market’ or the business model is a simple solution to complex problems, in particular improving the

'dinosaur-like' public sector, has made it particularly appealing [2]. However, neoliberalism has clearly not delivered its promise of simple solutions, nor of rendering improved, efficient public services, running smoothly and on time like clockwork trains [5]. Rather it has been thwarted by its failure to take account of the very real differences between public service and private enterprise, with the 'business model' being a blunt instrument that has been adapted, and is not even appropriate, to specific contexts [6]. We argue that that this critique comes into sharp focus in the university setting.

As authors, we are both experienced academics, who have worked in higher education for 28 and 22 years, respectively, and have been in managerial positions in our respective universities. We do not claim to be scholars of economic theory but we have had career-long interest in organisational behaviour and in particular how (even if unintentionally) work organisations can come to have a negative influence on the health and well-being of staff. We have witnessed seismic changes in our respective institutions in the past two decades and we have unique perspective on how these changes, once thought beneficial, have (and continue to) cannibalise the collegiate and collaborative culture of the academic working environment. These changes that we observe include the introduction of tenure track, the increased challenges for those seeking to achieve tenure, the ever-shifting goalposts for achievement of promotion, the narrowing of focus to research impact in the form of citation metrics, with teaching and academic service relegated to less importance, thereby compromising academic organisational citizenship behaviours. We perceive the changes have driven a culture of individualism, accompanied by a myopic focus on university rankings and expectations to 'publish or perish' in top journals. We see our culture, once at least broadly collegial, becoming a voracious competitive arena, where individually academics compete with one another for promotions and awards, at an inter-departmental level for resources and at an institutional level jockeying for positions above neighbouring universities in the rankings. We are aware how this has been particularly damaging for the culture of the academy but it is also gendered in its impact for women, who become both professionally and psychologically disadvantaged. This is why we use the phrase, somewhat reluctantly, institutional bullying, as we explore the similitude of this culture with bullying workplace cultures.

The aim of this paper is to examine how neoliberalism has given rise to a culture of bullying, which we argue is conceptually consistent with institutional bullying. We hope to draw attention to this turn to neoliberalism and stimulate a discourse of cultural change for the academy. This paper will first describe institutional bullying, outline neoliberalism and managerialism and its incursion to universities, as described by Deem [7], including the marketisation of services, the fostering of competition, and the monitoring of efficiency and effectiveness through measurement of outcomes and individual staff performances in Irish universities. We conclude with a discussion on the implications for Irish universities.

2. Institutional Bullying

Definitional debates about workplace bullying abound in the academic literature, with no absolute consensus or consistent definition employed [8]. However, definitions do have recurrent themes and features (*ibid*). Definitions, overall, refer to a wide range of behaviours and experiences but, in general, these are described as adverse in some way (e.g., unreasonable, unasked for, inappropriate), as a process or a pattern (e.g., repeated, systematic, escalating), and in terms of outcomes (undermining dignity and self worth, compromising psychological safety, health harming) [8–14]. Frequently positioned as an individualised and interpersonal problem (the quintessential personality clash), workplace bullying is now understood as an organisational problem [15–17], a reframing that positions organisational factors at the core of the phenomenon.

There is evidence that bullying is more prevalent in universities generally, compared to many other sectors or industries [18]. Studies of bullying in Irish universities provide evidence of micro-political behaviours grounded in toxic academic culture, poor organisational responses and a failure to address complex power relations [19–21]. Poor experiences

of leadership in Irish HEIs have been cited as leading to profoundly damaging experiences, including adverse physical and psychological impacts, repercussions for career trajectory, and fear. Accumulated research has led to an understanding that bullying flourishes and becomes pervasive in environments that create the antecedents for it, with consistent findings indicating role conflict, or role ambiguity, where employees perceive contradictory or unclear demands predicting bullying, and work intensification [15,22,23] as particularly salient. Bullying is associated with an organisational culture that does not have appropriate avenues of redress and therefore 'blind-eyes' bullying; where managers feel that they have support, at least implicitly, to mistreat their staff [24]; where the personal 'costs' of doing so are low, or worse, even rewarded [15]; and where there is a high level of competition within the workforce [25]. These conditions that provide a culture in which interpersonal bullying can flourish have been argued to be present in universities, and to be linked to the encroaching neoliberalisation of universities, and we build here on this previous work [20,26,27].

We wish to develop the concept of institutional bullying. D'Cruz and Norohona advance the concept of depersonalised bullying to explain the way in which call-centre agents employed in international call centres experience their work as an oppressive regime, a function of the service-level agreement between employers and clients which determines organisational practices [28]. Liefoghe and Mackenzie Davey argued similarly that the organisation plays an active role in bullying, beyond facilitating interpersonal bullying, and introduce the term institutionalised bullying. They define this as the organisation being responsible for bullying practices rather than the individuals within it, and provide evidence of this in a telecommunications company and previously industrial catering [29]. We favour the term 'institutional bullying' over depersonalised bullying, in the context of higher education, and in particular publicly funded universities. Drawing on both D'Cruz and Norohona and Liefoghe and Mackenzie Davey, we understand this to occur when the policies and established practices in an organisation systematically impose oppressive or damaging conditions on the individuals in the organisation, the routine subjugation of employees by organisational practices (*ibid.*). The practices of neoliberalism cannot be attributed to any one person. Indeed, they may not have been devised with any harm in mind. However, we argue that neoliberalism, as it is expressed in universities, engenders institutional bullying. Practices such as unreasonable demands on staff, lack of care for worker well-being, punitive managerial regimes through legitimising relentless requirements, job insecurity, arbitrary promotion systems set up to result in failure, increased individualism, and increased competitiveness have been systematically and relentlessly imposed on to higher education [1,3,30]) to the detriment of employee health and well-being [31–33] and, when taken together, constitute institutional bullying.

At a fundamental level, new public management, (the expression of neoliberalism in universities), is characterised by an absence of trust in, or respect for, staff [2]. We maintain that Irish universities, in embracing neoliberal ideology, have slipped into this space. We draw on research on the deteriorating conditions generally in universities [1–3,34–41] and evidence from studies conducted in Irish universities of a working environment that has not only become highly stressful, but has been described as administratively unsupported [32], in-egalitarian [30], over-competitive [31], careless [42] and toxic [43].

3. Neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM)

New public management (NPM), the golden child of neoliberalism, is the application of market economy principles to public services in order to achieve efficiencies and value for money. It is described as a post-bureaucratic paradigm of public management, breaking from traditions such as Weberian bureaucracy and Taylor's Scientific Management [44]. As part of the valorising of economic rationality, NPM challenges the 'old' model of administration, claiming that 'management' is of a higher order than the traditional administration executed by public servants (*ibid.*). Regulation is required, efficiency is the Holy Grail, and competition—for 'consumers' and between institutions—is considered the best mechanism

to achieve it [30]. NPM, in short, is the institutionalisation of market values in the public sector [42]. The application of private-sector management practices to public services such as education ensures a re-modelling of those services, which serves the interests of corporate and political elites to a much greater extent than before [1], regardless of the absence of any evidence of its actual benefits in the sector [45].

With NPM, universities are now required to ‘prove themselves worthy’ of the public money that they receive, and to make universities more efficient, productive, lean and transparent [3]. Driven in no small part by budgetary restrictions on spending in many countries, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been forced to secure external sources of funding [1], an accelerator for the neoliberal agenda. In Ireland, the NPM paradigm shift has coincided with demographic changes and social changes, such as improved engagement with and output from secondary education, resulting in large increases in access and enrolment creating an increasingly diverse student population. These factors, combined with principles of NPM ideology such as devolved financial management, performance measurement and competitiveness, have allowed NPM to become a transnational myth about what constitutes a rational management structure for HEIs [35]. Although the principles of NPM are not implemented in the same way in every HE sector [45], corporatism, managerialism, and marketisation have, over the past 20 years, become bywords for governance in HEIs, a hegemony that has thoroughly transformed the way HEIs operate [31].

NPM in Ireland and Irish Universities

The Irish government embraced new NPM to promote neoliberal economic and social policies from the 1990s onwards [46]. Ireland was considered a conservative adopter of NPM, slowly introducing a reform programme in 1994, and yet managing to have an ‘Irish-style’ programme that was far from radical, perhaps due to absence of whole-hearted right-wing political sponsors [6]. However, events overtook government in the form of the sovereign debt crisis, plunging Ireland into drastic measures to cut back on public spending, and serving to intensify challenges facing the HE sector [1]. The economic crisis, described as the worst recession since the foundation of the state (we tentatively write *so far*, given the looming post-pandemic crisis), greatly accelerated a public sector reform agenda [47]. Paring back public sector, a sector seen by politicians as being market-shy and inefficient, was presented as a way of addressing the economic crises [48]. Public sector recruitment was frozen in 2009, and service reform plans focused on themes such as ‘customer-oriented’ service, innovative service delivery, performance management, value-for money, and results-led focus [49]. The effect on the sector was to directly reduce staffing by 10% [26], and pay levels in the region of 5–12% [50] to achieve additional savings, a situation that continued until 2016. The NPM-style reforms, which in other jurisdictions could have been facilitated with financial incentives, were expected to be effected, not only without incentives, but with significantly reduced take-home pay for public sector workers [50].

Consistent with MacCartaigh’s observations, the educational sector in Ireland only started to embrace the kinds of neoliberal policies prevalent in the UK and US since the 1990s after 2000 [51], concurring with dramatic social and demographic change. Total enrolment in third-level education increased at an accelerated pace, compared to other EU countries, with limited public debate about the implications. Between 2000 and 2015, the increase in HE enrolment in Ireland was 24%, compared to 15% across EU countries [30]. The OECD average proportion of people entering third-level education at Bachelors level in 2017 was 53%, but 69% in Ireland [52]. The number of students in publicly funded HEIs has risen by approximately 2% per annum since 1960 and shows no abatement [53], rising by 33% between 2007 and 2017 alone [54]. In Ireland, two out of three school leavers enter a third-level institution before the age of twenty-three [48].

This expansion of the system has coincided with the directives of NPM and the adoption of market-based models of management, and the real need to grapple with severely

reduced state funding in light of austerity [48,55]. The impact of expansion combined with NPM has been dramatic. During the time that student numbers were ratcheting up, staff numbers were steadily declining; average staff/student ratios reduced from 16:1 to 20:1 between 2007 and 2018 [55], while state funding was declining, for example by 22 per cent in the seven-year period to 2015 [55]. This placed universities under pressure to generate income from the selling of patents, the provision of consultancy and the creation of private companies [56], facilitating the normalisation of neoliberalism. A HEA review in 2018 noted that these changes were clearly in the context of the sector absorbing the required paradigm shift contained within NPM;

HEIs (. . .) have diversified income streams, cut costs, run down historic surpluses and invested in international education to meet student demand and stay afloat through the period of austerity. Institutions have sought to recruit more international students or to reduce spending on capital projects in an environment where fixed costs, such as those relating to staff, constitute the greatest proportion of their budget but where the policy framework is largely outside their control [55] (p. 6)

Despite these initiatives, the overall financial position of Irish HEIs has continued to deteriorate, and is expected to intensify with the anticipated economic crisis post-pandemic. HEIs are increasingly challenged to meet high national targets (c. 70% of school leavers) while also continuing to compete for international standing and rankings. The commitment to neoliberalism has not weakened, being explicitly stated in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, described as the key instrument through which higher education is increasingly driven *by and for* business interests, and which achieved notoriety due to the fact that the experts responsible for the report were drawn almost exclusively from corporate and political circles [1,48]. The rational argument for NPM, therefore, is budgetary, namely restrictions and costs in the name of ‘efficiencies’, and this is very evident in the Irish context. The application of NPM is ostensibly due to the perceived unaffordability of the university sector, and we note that profound changes have been implemented with little or no consultation or controversy [48]. The inherent pressures are evidenced in the findings of Clarke et al.’s survey of Irish academics, where 72% reported deteriorating working conditions, including more students and longer hours, with reducing administrative support [32], a ‘classic’ high demand–low control scenario associated with increased risk for work-related stress [57].

We argue that there are deeper, more sinister factors underpinning the neoliberalisation of universities, consistent with the foundational value base of free market capitalism. Stimuli in the external environment notwithstanding, the introduction of NPM into universities is consistent with the desire to change and control the sector as part of a political neoliberal agenda [30]). Here and elsewhere, the neoliberal project is seen as a fundamental challenge to the way in which universities have operated and their relationship with the state [30]. Two related beliefs have been identified driving NPM—a distrust of academics with regard to their motivation and ability to manage their own work, to ‘keep’ producing and to self-improve [2], and an assumption that academics are ‘out for themselves’, and therefore their activities have to be harnessed and brought under control for the purposes of society as well as for the sake of efficiency [3]. As argued by Lynch and Ivancheva, managerialism and the commercialisation of universities undermines academic freedom. Academic freedom is greatly prized and stalwartly defended in universities across the world, yet the shoe-horning of activities into market-relevant knowledge leads senior management in universities to limit academic freedom by under-resourcing particular subjects [58], and even more worryingly through the disabling of the tenure system and the casualisation of labour. New managerial reforms in effect curb the agency of professionals in public sector organisations [59]. These changes fundamentally challenge the principle of self-governance, a long-standing principle underpinning the university sector. Instead, academics must be ‘managed,’ ‘controlled,’ incentivised and made efficient, and this is achieved through a number of overlapped strategies, collectively gathered under the umbrella of managerialism [2]. Managerialism, as described by Deem [7], includes the marketisation of services,

the fostering of competition between employees, and the monitoring of efficiency and effectiveness through measurement of outcomes and individual staff performances, or ‘instrumentality’ [30]. Overlap notwithstanding, these will now be explored in turn in the Irish context.

4. Features of Neoliberalism in Irish Universities

4.1. Marketisation of Services

In ‘choosing’ a university, students are cast as consumers of knowledge, with universities operating within a knowledge economy [1], and academics and students therefore positioned in a consumer–service provider relationship [56]. Programmes become ‘products’ to be marketed and the university becomes a ‘brand’, both of which, we argue, are inappropriate terms for education work. In the neoliberal university, staff are expected to ‘win’ students, and resources are based on how well they do this. There are only nine universities (at the time of writing) in Ireland, five of which are in the greater Dublin region. Clearly, some will be ‘winners’ and some will be ‘losers’ by virtue of location. The current funding model drives universities to compete to take students off one another, with no consideration for the fact that certain features of the ‘market’ are set. Geographical location remains a significant determinant of choice of university in Ireland, at least for students of lower social classes, and is most pronounced for lower ability students from these social backgrounds [60]. Yet staff are still required to ‘sell’ the brand to all potential students. Significant work is devoted to marketing; open day productions, finding student testimonies, drafting text for brochures, and career guidance sessions. This has crept into the workload of the academic, with marketing specialists provided only to ‘advise’. Any resistance to participating in marketing activities is met with the raising of the spectre of fear that programmes will not be viable, that course directors are not meeting their targets and that the institutions are under threat as a result [2]. This coercive and intimidatory practice can be experienced as institutional bullying.

Turning the student into a consumer that is seeking value for money has serious implications for higher education. It creates a commodification of education that sees universities promoting the ‘market-responsiveness’ of their programmes, and the ‘work-readiness’ of their graduates, at the loss of programmes that foster social critique and critical analysis [56]. We find it concerning that commodification transforms an academic relationship into something that has little to do with education, a development that has occurred outside of the control of the professional core of the university. There is evidence that Irish academics perceive that HEIs have become market driven, which is part of the perceived deterioration in working conditions [32].

Staff that seek to voice concerns about these trends run the risk of being seen as troublesome and become subject to warnings that with such an attitude, they will not ‘get on’. Marketisation conveniently ignores that fact that the consumer is also the producer [36], and therefore influences the product. Furthermore, the marketisation dynamic drags in its wake the customer-is-always-right notion [56], which fundamentally shifts the balance of power between academic and employer as well as with the student [48]. While it can be argued that older elite models of university culture were unbalanced in respect of power engagements, it appears that the pendulum has swung to the other side, disempowering academics in the process.

4.2. Fostering of Competition between Employees

Competitiveness is the beating heart of neoliberalism. Indeed, marketisation, writ large, is competition for students. However, competition pervades every aspects of the neoliberal university. Susan George, in explaining neoliberalism, states:

The central value (. . .) of neo-liberalism itself is the notion of competition - competition between nations, regions, firms and of course between individuals. Competition is central because it separates the sheep from the goats, the men from the boys, the fit from the unfit.

It is supposed to allocate all resources, whether physical, natural, human or financial with the greatest possible efficiency. [61] (p. 3).

If we read universities, colleges and departments for nations, regions and firms in the quotation here, we have an accurate summation of the neoliberal ideology in academia. Mirroring George's claim for society at large, academics in universities compete with one another for awards, grants and promotions, departments or schools compete with one another for resources, and universities compete with one another for points via international ranking systems, in a series of nested zero-sum games. We explore these below.

It is uncritically assumed that competition improves efficiency; we produce better 'outputs' when under pressure and when competing with others [4]. George argues that the competitive system had the opposite effect in Thatcherist Britain [61] and we contend that this notion of competition, as exercised in the neoliberal university, is as deeply problematic as it was for the UK economy. Competition has always been a feature of research endeavour [62]. However, the neoliberal ideology underpinning NPM has contributed a dramatic intensification of competition [62] in a way that, we argue, has immensely altered the day-to-day working environment in universities. Competition between departments or research groupings within faculties creates winners, those who participate in the competitive game to secure funding, and 'loser' – those who do not—a situation that permits management to make a pejorative distinction between research-active and non-research-active academics [62].

Competition undermines collegial relations, as academics are set against each other in contests for grants, promotions and resources [2,51], creating a situation whereby they are constantly engaged in a struggle to just do their work. Collegiality is a term often carelessly used and, like competition, can be used uncritically, with no reflection on whether it really existed in the 'golden age' of past pre-NPM days and whether it was anything more than a romanticised ideal [63]. Collegiality, as defined by Tapper and Palfreyman (cited in [63]), is a complex concept with structural, cultural and behavioural aspects, few of which are evident in contemporary university life [63]. However, the cultural aspect which refers to shared values such as academic freedom [63] and a shared vision for teaching among colleagues who both trust and respect one another [64] is likely to lead to better outcomes for students and facilitate a psychologically safe climate for staff. While it may be somewhat naïve to cling to a rose-tinted notion of collegiality, one cannot deny that individual competition and the culture of performativity it engenders threaten the potential well-being of staff and the nature of academic work profoundly. Macfarlane's survey of faculty members with regard to collegiality found that the demands on academics to comply with a competitive ethos meant that the opposite actually occurred [63].

The current performativity climate ensures that collegiality, even in its more limited construction, is effectively eroded, replaced by a climate of rivalry and micro-political behaviour, with all the passive aggression and even overt bullying that goes with it. 'Gift' work, according to Smyth, for example, reviewing papers, external examining, serving on professional bodies, is a form of collegiality that becomes totally corrupted by NPM [2]. As these are folded into performance appraisals, promotional applications, and institutional reviews, they become metricised, and we come to do them strategically [2]. This, and 'managerial' or committee work, which is now required as part of collegial gift, is at risk of being done for the wrong reasons. If done for specific gain, it may not be done well, or may be abandoned as soon as it has served its purpose, which is problematic for the institution at a number of levels. It certainly is unlikely to deliver the holy grail of efficiency. Competitiveness hijacks what are at least broadly collegial processes, focusing academics on extrinsic rewards, and as a result, we become less and less likely to undertake tasks for organisational citizenship but more for individual gain [2]. We become strategic choosers of Curriculum Vitae enhancers, with less regard for the institutional whole.

Competition also works against creating the appropriate conditions for creative work, which is the essence of good research [2,34] and good teaching. To identify new ideas, new solutions to problems, and new ways of understanding, we are in essence being creative.

Workload alone chips away at the possibility of creativity, but the intense competition that surrounds academic work in the neoliberal university potentially annihilates it.

4.2.1. Promotion: The ‘Super-Human’ Academic

Competition, and the tyranny of performativity is nowhere more evident than in promotional processes, where individual academics are pitted against one another. Progression (tenure achievement) and promotional processes in Irish universities are the pernicious effect of NPM incarnate, and we argue, contribute significantly to a climate of institutional bullying. Typically, candidates are pitched into intense competition with their peers for a small number of senior posts. This can undermine collegiality at the level of the department or discipline, which is then problematic for inter-departmental competition for resources. Promotional competitions require that candidates provide evidence of excellence across a range of performance indicators, despite the fact that to be excellent across all of these indicators would require ‘super human’ skills. Consistent excellence on all fronts is unattainable; a myth, according to Smyth [2]. The process triggers at best self-presentational behaviours, at worst falsification. It requires assessments by peers (e.g., ‘shows achievement’, ‘evidence of contribution’, ‘demonstrates scholarly excellence’), which are essentially subjective judgements. The processes however are presented as rational and objective, which they clearly cannot be. Peers, even with the best of intention, are unlikely to be able to suppress their disciplinary or indeed other biases, as they too are operating in a competitive environment. Even though teaching is a less competitive activity than research [62], promotional candidates still have to compete on teaching ‘outputs’, regardless of their discipline. The system is inherently unfair, which has a very significant impact on those who do not manage it [65]. This makes for a stressful and punitive working environment, as internal competitiveness is associated with increased levels of bullying [23].

Candidates who steer themselves on an ambitious high-performance research track often eschew or at least limit committee and managerial work, while those that take up this work find their overall profile is not rated highly by the panel. Promotional processes are particularly prone to gamesmanship, encouraging many ‘Least Publishable Units’ in favour of one or two significant scholarly papers that meaningfully advance knowledge [34,66]. This is summed up by Holborow and O’Sullivan; . . . *the winners in the ‘game’, the connected hustlers and adroit self-promoters in an already markedly careerist environment, are massively rewarded, not only financially but also with further institutional resources and research breaks with which to cement their position* [48] (p. 111).

In promotional competitions, there are usually only a fixed number of posts, which means that at least two-thirds of entrants come out of the competition feeling humiliated and demoralised. They either become more ‘strategic and individualised’ in their choices and service, or withdraw, becoming cynical and bitter, avoiding committee and course leadership roles. How this improves ‘efficiency’ is a mystery to those of us in disciplinary leadership positions. The application process alone is lengthy [67], incurring significant opportunity costs. Those who succeed may have cycled through the process two even three times, while those unsuccessful may become caught in a spiral of downward cycling, and because the applications are judged by large committees, the ignominy is public. The feedback received from the previous submission may not be that helpful as the goalposts constantly shift, leaving applicants uncertain and disenfranchised [67,68]. It is perhaps one of the most insidious outcomes of NPM; a large swathe of staff, all frenetically working to the standard above their salary [65], in order to prove that they are promotable before they are paid for that work, or until cynicism kicks in and stops them (see, for example [67]). The neoliberalist mindset assumes failure to attain a promotion acts a motivating spur to do more—secure more grants, publish more papers, innovate more teaching approaches, join more committees, and so on. However, repeated failure and perceived unfairness simply demotivate and corrode morale [65]. Staff seeking promotion find that they are always in the ‘game’ of trying to maximise output, often at the expense of working with students, (because research output is seen as more important than teaching output, despite attempts

to balance the criteria), while at all times ensuring they do not openly criticise the system in case it jeopardises their chances of promotion. Just as bullied targets internalise the negative messages sent by the bully, staff who are not promoted internalise the institutional message that they are not good enough, have not worked hard enough, and suffer greatly as a result [68].

Competitiveness creates a double jeopardy in respect of gender. The higher education sector in general, and Irish universities in particular, have been exposed in terms of extreme gender inequality at the senior level [69], a situation which has left many women perceiving themselves to be unrecognised and unrewarded, and for whom unfairness is a backdrop to their daily experience as academics. In Ireland, at the end of 2019 (Latest available figures), only 26% of full professors and 37% of associate professors were women. Across the HE sector, a man's odds of becoming a professor are more than double those of a woman with a similar research score and age [70] and on virtually every index used to measure individual and institutional performance, women are disadvantaged [71]. In recent years, gender inequality in Irish HEIs has been brought into sharp focus following two landmark Equality Tribunal rulings and several out-of-court settlements in one university [72]. Initiatives and change processes across all nine universities to address this disparity have been plentiful since the rulings, including Athena Swan awards, quotas for internal promotions, non-conscious bias training, 'ramp-up' of post-maternity grants and enhanced maternity leave cover. However, the proportion of senior academic staff (Professor, Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer) that are female, remains stubbornly low. Some initiatives just add to the workload of women, with no discernible effect. An evaluation of Athena Swan in a medical university finds that the programme's enactment itself is reproducing gender inequity, as female staff are undertaking a disproportionate amount of Athena SWAN work, with potential negative impacts on individual women's career progression [73]. The way in which merit and excellence are assessed in universities and the way in which organisational structures treat women and men differently are the most likely reasons for the under representation of women [40,74], which cannot be seen in isolation from the excellence imperative in the corporatisation of universities [30]. Excellence has been identified in the context of universities as gendered [40]. Men are more likely to be deemed excellent even when the achievements between male and female academics are comparable. Female competence is assessed by higher standards than those employed for men and female brilliance is usually doubted or questioned [40]. Women, therefore, are particularly vulnerable to these neoliberal university practices.

Promotions are of particular significance since the majority of staff will attempt at least one promotion in their academic career. They are notoriously challenging processes and while most women clearly experience greater inequality, some men also suffer in the highly competitive environment created by NPM strictures. Promotions are harder to secure than externally advertised posts [65] and become increasingly difficult as one attempts to ascend the career ladder. Staff perceive them as manifestly unfair, described as a process of mutual torture (for both the individual and the institution) and for which rejection is particularly difficult [65]. In the Irish context, while 70% of promotions to lecturer will succeed, only 52% succeed in securing senior lecturer and only 40% are successfully promoted to professorial (full + associate) posts [75]. The constant and cumulative effect of working in an environment in which one is 'never quite there' or 'second best' and where one does not trust the processes to be just or fair or transparent has potentially profound effects in terms of a sense of self, morale and well-being [68].

Institutional bullying is characterised by on-going, persistent unreasonable demands on staff and lack of care for the impact of these processes on welfare and well-being. The changes wrought by NPM in universities create both work intensification and work extensification, the latter defined as less work-rest and more overtime [37,76], as work spreads across time and space, including the kitchen table, the train and the weekend. This brings a worrying acceptance among many academics that a normal working week extends into evenings and leisure time, such as Saturday and Sunday [37]. When the negative effects

of competition outweigh the positives, a condition described as ‘over-competitiveness’ [34], the situation becomes highly stressful at an individual level, and is likely governed by the law of diminishing returns at the institutional level [66]. Academic staff, even those not actively seeking promotion, are required to prove that they are meeting targets on several fronts in terms of research outputs, often year on year with no regard for previous achievements or recognition, in addition to carrying an increasingly heavier teaching load in what Smyth describes a hopelessly unrealistic situation [2]. Smyth documents the tragic case of Professor Stefan Grimm, who committed suicide under pressure of performativity targets in the UK in 2014 [2]. Grimm’s case may appear extreme on the surface, but his plight is one that many academics recognise, and increasingly fear.

Competition has always been a feature of academic environments, but we argue here that NPM has raised it to a near art form. Constant, unrelenting competition for awards, promotions, grants, is toxic. Competition in the hands of NPM has become a device that makes a select few academic staff winners and everyone else losers. This, we conclude, is a clear case of the institution systematically imposing oppressive, damaging conditions on individuals.

4.2.2. Competition between Institutions—The Rankings Game

Neoliberalism, being concerned with increased monitoring of institutional activity has the effect of placing performance and output at the centre of university operations [1]. Neatly sidestepping the fact that universities have had procedures for satisfactorily monitoring quality in respect of teaching and programme development for many years [30], a raft of new ‘quality assurance’ procedures have been imposed; examining and assessing teaching practices, student feedback processes, research output and impact metrics [77]. NPM trades in terms such as ‘excellence’, ‘quality’, and ‘world class’, which may have meaning at certain moments in time but are meaningless at the level of the institution, as no single university can realistically be excellent at everything, all the time. [2]. These processes, however, have a very significant impact on the daily life of academics and form part of the relentless narrative of competitiveness. They find particular expression in the ‘rankings game’.

Nowhere is instrumentation more self-defeating than the international ranking schemes, instituted in 2003 [78], and taking firm hold in Irish universities c. 2010. This ‘game’ is a big, global industry involving approximately 1000 universities, creating intense competition between universities and involving significant resourcing in any one university. Many governments have undertaken actions to reshape or restructure higher education systems and institutions to ensure they can better compete in these excellence stakes [79]. Rankings have been stridently criticised from within and without universities, yet they stubbornly persist. UNESCO has questioned the potential harm of these rankings, identifying that they create intense competition between universities all over the world [80]. However, university managers, albeit with some scepticism, feel that they must be committed to play the only game in town [51].

There are three prominent and prestigious ranking systems—QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education World University Rankings and Academic Ranking of World Universities (commonly called Shanghai Rankings)—and Irish universities feature in all three. It is worrisome that these ranking companies are all commercial enterprises making the irrational adherence to them all the more surprising. Clearly, the corporate tail is wagging the university dog, and at the expense of the well-being of individual academics.

Criticism of rankings includes their source and by implication the utility of inter-institutional comparisons [78]. The dimensions and indicators of quality and the weightings applied to these are based on value judgements undertaken by the companies that operate the rankings, which means they vary from one system to another and can also change over time, as new dimensions and indicators are introduced [81]. Much of the focus is on the highest-ranking universities for primacy at the top of the ladder, in an almost unseemly scramble for the prize of being ‘top quality’. Despite claiming that they measure a diverse

and holistic set of indicators, in reality, ranking systems only measure research. Indicators of teaching and internationalism are, in effect, proxies for research activity [82]. The only way to rise in the rankings therefore is to improve research performance and visibility, which inevitably means devoting more resources to research, neglecting other, arguably equally important, functions [81] and then ‘marketing’ selected successes. Opinion surveys (from other academics) contribute heavily (e.g., up to 40%) to ranking systems, which provide only crude, and often illusory, indicators of an academic’s performance [3]. Crucially, they do not actually measure quality. Even the instigator of the first ranking system cautions that they cannot be the sole source of information that guides decisions about the quality of universities [78]. For all intents and purposes, rankings largely capture institutional wealth [78]. Yet they are much loved by many university presidents who consider them a proxy for their own brilliance, and feed a need for institutional chest beating [2]. Bekhradnia concludes that ‘rankings are a zero-sum game, with as many losers as winners—no matter how hard universities play and how much they improve—there will be others that may have improved even more, as Irish universities have found’ [81]. And yet, the process is defended by university managers and governments alike, and staff are required to produce the documents that feed this particularly hungry beast. Individual staff can be powerless in face of this institutional roller-coaster.

More fundamentally, according to Smyth, quality, or excellence in a university cannot be reliably and objectively quantified [2]. NPM assumes that ‘institutional excellence’ is the net sum of all the little excellences (academics and their work), as witnessed in the implementation of processes that explicitly link institutional performance to university performance, driving a constant excellence narrative, a situation viewed by senior managers as largely unproblematic [51]. There is no appreciation of how living with a constant excellence narrative, in a competition that is unwinnable for the vast majority of universities, impacts on the well-being of the rank and file academic staff.

5. Institutional Processes, Performativity and Pressure

The neoliberal university is preoccupied with efficiency and output not only as part of the rankings game but also within other more localised ‘games’, such as quality reviews, research assessments exercises, strategic target reporting or performance appraisals. There is an obsession with the quantification of outputs at individual and institutional levels [2], where everything is rendered to what is numerically measurable. These multiple accountability measures create a regime of performativity [2,39,83], which impacts both directly and indirectly on staff, as individual academics are required to assemble information about teaching hours, students grades, student feedback processes, student retention, staff training, PhD recruitment and completion rates, international recruitment, non-traditional recruitment, research income, publications, impact, and citations, and then to relay this to various central offices/functions, usually on a yearly or biennial cycle. They then may be required to attend review boards, strategic operational planning team meetings or workshops to consider the findings and recommendations for improvement arising out of performance reviews, and to report on progress on those recommendations. In this context, it is not surprising that academic staff report deteriorating working conditions [32] and increased work intensity [84]. In preparing data and figures for the various instrumentality exercises, many academics find themselves engaged in *work about work*, defined as the activities that take away from meaningful work, such as communicating about work, or chasing the status of work [85]. The issue with this measurement is not any one process, indeed often a specific assessment process is accepted by a department or School, as it improves practice, it is the inexorable, on-going performativity that wears people down. No sooner has one process been completed when another is visited on staff. The unspoken message is that nothing is every enough, staff are not trusted to do their jobs, but must constantly prove that they are doing them, and that are improving output even if at the expense of process, clearly a culture that can be experienced as bullying by the institution.

This intensification of work has become an endemic feature of academic life, and is described by Gill as pushing academics to breaking point. The sinister nature of the control

agenda inherent in NPM is captured in her observation describing one such process for reporting hours worked as being deliberately set up in such a way as to have the effect of rendering academics' over-working invisible [37]. In our experience, veterans of these 'work about work' processes, cynically comment that the list of follow-up activities for university management for a quality review rarely extends beyond two actions, while the list for the individual department or school can extend to at least two pages. The amount of work involved is extensive and serves to spawn further work [39], with the production of performance portfolios, research review documents, and other forms of institutional window dressing.

Managerialism reduces qualitative complexities, varieties of insight, originality and disciplinary differences to a table of figures [3]. Thus, we find ourselves engaging in what Alvesson calls 'functional stupidity' [86], pointless and useless exercises, which are sold under the guise of improving things (who can argue with that) but for which there is little or no evidence that they do [30]. Slavish adherence to regulative reviews rather than engaging with academics through dialogue erodes trust in the academic as an intellectual. These processes are legitimated in Ireland by state structures to enhance governance (and control) such as the HEA or the Irish University Alliance, yet have not demonstrated visible enhancement of education or research [30]. Workload models are another example of instrumentation [1] introduced ostensibly to address inequitable workload, but again with no evidence as to whether they actually do so, or simply just add to the workload of individual staff. More work about work.

6. The Erosion of the Academic Self

The praxes of NPM are critical to individual employee levels of perceived control insofar as they represent a shift in culture in universities to one of managerial control and intimidation [3] underpinned by a distrust of academics to assess their own activities and to improve [2]. Academic freedom can be understood as the free exchange of ideas through the rights of scholars to pursue research and teaching outside the control of powerful interest groups, including the freedom to pursue subjects based on intellectual interest, without control or censorship [58]. Yet the corporatisation of universities which leads to the commodification of knowledge seriously undermines this freedom [87]. Publication, rather than scholarship is rewarded, yet publication processes themselves are yet another minefield. 'Fair, equitable, unbiased' peer review is in reality open to many biases, including not deviating from the favoured perspectives of eminent academic voices that dominate the field [66]. The pressure to only publish in select journals further exacerbates this funnelling and in this way universities have increasingly become environments that suppress novel ideas or criticisms of accepted canon [34,66], yet another manifestation of institutional bullying. Public universities in Ireland are funded conditionally by the government based on student intake, although there is no seed funding for research. State research prioritisation exercises determine research grants which prioritise science and technology, clearly reflecting commercial interests [42], a policy approach termed scientization and which exacerbates gendering [30] (See both O'Connor (2014) and Lynch and Ivanacheva (2015) for scholarly discussion on this topic). Universities have uncritically accepted the prioritisation of research that promotes or facilitates production and process in high technological and biomedical industries, at the expense of teaching and of researching fields that aim to address social injustices, philosophical and/or ideological fields, Education and the Arts. In short, there is less freedom to 'think, inquire, write, discuss and engage' [58] or to choose ones outlet, and in this way individual academics have less and less control over the essence of their work.

7. Job Insecurity

Not typically a feature of higher education in the past, the neoliberalisation of higher education has permitted a very significant casualization of labour. The number of permanent academic positions has been gradually reduced and replaced by temporary, low-paid jobs [1],

in the order of approximately 50%, based on international figures [42]. Non-permanent posts range from yearly contracts to hourly contracts, with lower pay, limited or no pension benefits, and no sense of obligation or responsibility to the employee [37]. In Ireland, the cap on posts in the public sector imposed within austerity had the effect of driving up casual, temporary or fixed-term contracts for both research and teaching. This intersects with the desire to make labour more 'flexible' [1], neoliberal speak for increasing the power of corporate interests over workers. Public service agreements between the public sector unions and Government saw staff reductions (as outlined above) pay reductions in the order of 14%, a freeze on promotions, a moratorium on recruitment, non-automatic replacement of retired staff and mandatory flexible redeployment [1], the latter an unrealistic, yet stress-inducing requirement in universities. These stipulations have had direct implications for individual staff and post-doctoral candidature in addition to signalling a willingness to engage in a weakening of tenure and indirectly raising anxieties across the sector. Realistically, to cope with the increase in numbers and in student diversity, the visible response in universities was to increase precarity, and outsource specific functions (e.g., disability support) in which tutors or other workers are not protected by the regulations governing other university staff. Universities also have offered low paid [1] or even unpaid 'internships' participation in which exhibits a negative impact on graduate employment outcomes [88].

Quantification of the extent of labour casualization in academia in Ireland is not possible as such data is not available from the HEA or individual universities [31]. Courtois and O'Keefe conducted the first study of casual academic staff in Ireland on a non-probability sample of 227 academic staff, of which 73% were fully qualified casual lecturers, and 45% were hourly paid, and not entitled to sick, compassionate or maternity leave. Casual workers were on average 7.2 years in academia, giving lie to the notion that these are recently graduates seeking purchase on the lowest rungs of the career ladder. Three-quarters of casual lecturers were below the poverty threshold [31]. Many respondents volunteered information about constant changes in courses they teach, non-eligibility to apply for research funding or support for conference attendance, which combine to prevent career progression, conditions which contribute to lack of role clarity. They spoke of feeling trapped, frustrated, disillusioned and resentful. Many have given up hope of job security [31]. These findings are consistent with studies undertaken in the UK and the US, where casual academics are reporting chronic anxiety and hopelessness [37]. Contracts of Indefinite Duration are a particular feature of the Irish university labour market. They do not guarantee job security, are increasingly likely to be contested by university management, and vary in terms of benefits and commitment to a permanent income [42].

The nature of casualization in universities places precarious workers, especially those paid hourly, in an extremely disenfranchised position. Trade union representation may be sought when seeking redress which in turn has the effect of drawing trade union officials away from organising workers for collective action to representing workers in individual legal proceeding [42], no doubt a hidden benefit for management. Casualisation can also alienate workers from permanent staff, may cause resentments and unwitting hierarchies and places them in competition with one another for short-term research or teaching contracts which has the effect of isolating them from each other and preventing collective action against this form of structural inequality. In this way, as Courtois and O'Keefe observe, casualisation is both a consequence and a tool of neoliberalism [31]. The precariat are forced to habituate into a life of unstable living, what Standing calls 'a sort of existential insecurity' [89]. It also fosters the development of the 'precaritised mind', where one is constantly uncertain because of living in uncertainty and forced to do any work that may lead to other work either paid or unpaid [89]. They are perilously positioned at the edge of unsustainable debt. Working in this way can lessen empathy and reciprocity, understandably forcing self-interest and self-preservation to the fore [89]. This in turn contributes in no small part to the performative and individualistic culture. The impact on creativity is likely to be extremely negative. Furthermore, precarious employment is a powerful disincentive for one to discuss controversial issues or to express unorthodox

views which is according to Washburn, a troubling prospect for academic freedom [83,90]. In effect, it both silences and erodes academic freedom.

8. Discussion

This paper has argued that neoliberalism, in effect, the managerial reforms of NPM, have not had the desired outcome of increased efficiency. They are counterproductive, and have given rise to a range of pathologies and unintended cultural consequences in universities [1–3]. While not necessarily enacted with malice or intent to harm, writ large, they aggregate to create what we describe as institutional bullying. Just as the previous economic crises accelerated NPM, this current crisis provides an unprecedented opportunity for a recalibration of priorities.

Ireland, initially slower than others to adopt NPM in higher education, has caught up with her sister institutions in the UK, and is now on a similar course of new public management with significant erosion of the core values that heretofore saw universities as agents of societal critique. At some level, universities have been the architects of their own demise [2]. Seduced by our own belief in the values of excellence, quality and accountability, which at an individual level are important, we were not prepared for the voracious NPM ramping up of these to become institutional tyrannies that eclipse discourse of individuality and difference, where critique is unwelcome. The social contract that previously held the university in respectful engagement with its people is changing rapidly. The university was the vehicle through which academics fostered knowledge generation. The balance has shifted to academics becoming the vehicles of delivery to the sector's NPM goals. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves in an epochal moment. We hear of the 'new normal' and we are aware of the changed nature of teaching and learning and of what was previously taken for granted. Some of the current planning regimes for this 'new normal' have worrying overtones of NPM's terrible twins, i.e., more regulation and less trust. If universities remain stuck in the NPM narrative, they will remain in a narrative that keeps failing academics, their students and society. The existential crisis we find ourselves in gives us the opportunity to halt these trends.

NPM in universities has not had the desired effect of rendering universities '*more efficient and productive, more lean and transparent, and above all, more modern*' [3] (p. 1). It does not work, and rather more significantly, may be having the opposite effect. The two primary functions of universities, to research and to teach, are both currently seriously compromised by NPM. Universities may well be producing more and more research 'output' but this is at the risk of it being poorer, less inspired, and carefully uncritical of many of the powerful forces in society. We say this based on the scholarly critique offered by Lynch and Ivancheva, arguing that academic freedom is now, in the neoliberal university, curtailed [58], as we find ourselves less free to research ideas based on natural curiosity and less likely to be permitted to engage in social critique, debate, critical analysis and scrutiny [2]. We spend part of our research and teaching time preparing data and figures for the processes created to document how much research and teaching we are doing. As we increase student numbers, apparently exponentially, yet are restricted in staffing and resources, it is inevitably that standards will drop. When core services, such as disability support are outsourced in the interests of economic rationalisation, it is likely that students and staff will be under-served, as bought-in services are delivered in a de-contextualised manner.

We described bullying as adverse behaviours and experiences (e.g., unreasonable, unasked for, inappropriate), that are processes or form a pattern (e.g., repeated, systematic, escalating), with negative outcomes for health and well-being (undermining dignity and self worth, compromising psychological safety, health harming).

NPM has been adopted by the senior management in Irish universities with a striking degree of acceptance and conformity [30,48,51], and without debate and discussion by rank and file academics, rendering it unasked for, as noted by Lynch et al. in their observation that managerial complicity was vital for realising new managerial reform; "*The enactment of performance indicators and the availability of surveillance mechanisms instituted through new*

information technologies made the tasks of managing and controlling professionals much more feasible than it has been hitherto." [91] (p. 5). While the true nature of all the changes wrought by NPM may not have been anticipated, nonetheless, many are now seen as unreasonable [32,84], especially precarity [31]. The nature of many aspects of NPM runs counter to what many understand as the essence of a public university, and in this way they are inappropriate.

With regard to process and pattern, a search of literature on this aspect of Irish academic life yields a growing body of work evidencing escalation (e.g., Lynch Grummell and Divine (2012); Morrissey (2013); O'Connor (2014); SIPTU, (2015); Clarke et al., (2015); Courtois and O'Keeffe (2015); Lawless et al., (2016); Deasy and Mannix McNamara (2017); Hodgins and Mannix McNamara (2017); Mercelle and Murphy (2017); Holborow and O'Sullivan (2017) Hodgins and Mannix McNamara (2019) Ivancheva et al., (2019) Fahie, Cullinan et al. (2019) O'Connor, Ma and Ladish (2019)).

When bullied, the target feels unable to defend themselves or to take action to stop the process [92], clearly in evidence as universities steam roll NPM 'reforms'. When the policies and established practices in an organisation systematically impose oppressive or damaging conditions on the individuals in the organisation, it is very hard to resist, in part because the process, in and of itself, involves the subjugation of employees [29]. Bullying is characterised by an imbalance of power [13,92,93]; that is, the bully is in a position of power over the target, either hierarchical or emotional. This exercise of power is often called the first face of power, visible and subject to challenge in an open system [94,95]. However, organisations are complex theatres of power, and bullying is caught in the many scripts and acts that are played out daily often in subtle ways. Institutional bullying is a more subtle exercise of power. Sometimes, the bigger the bully, the less likely we are to 'see' it. Lukes warns of the most sinister exercise of power as the exercise that implants in people's minds interests that are contrary to their own [95]. In effect, there is no conflict or challenge because those who hold power have managed to make others accept their agenda uncritically and worse still adopt the agenda as their own as natural, even good. In a remarkable example of this, we do the work of NPM as academics and in so doing are the architects of our own demise. We unwittingly perpetuate our own oppression [2]. Because we believe in and strive to produce excellent research at an individual level, and to improve society on the basis of it, we fail to effectively question what is happening, leading Gill to describe academics as model neoliberal subjects [37]. We fail to see (at least easily, or quickly) that the processes we are engaging in under the new banner of excellence, quality, and productivity are our undoing, as the aggregation of these concepts at an institutional level is not just a simple matter of mathematics, it fundamentally alters the nature of academic work and its function in society. The corporatisation of universities fosters a narrow instrumental approach to education, which as O'Connor observes, legitimises the pursuit of economic self-interest and valuing the status of the institution rather than the quality of education and research, thus engendering a decline in the perceived trustworthiness of professionals and the power of academics in the role of university governance [30]. In effect, NPM ramps up a particular form of individualism while schizophrenically espousing the need for more collegial engagement, an unfeasible and stress engendering requirement.

With regard to outcome, occupational stress in higher education is now a well-established phenomenon generally [33,39,96], and in Irish HEIs [32,84,97]. Excessive demand coupled with low control or decisional latitude are well-established drivers of work-related stress, the combination of which has a direct and deleterious effect on health [98,99]. It is self-evident that the inordinate levels of instrumentality described here, in addition to increases in student numbers and a concomitant decrease in staff numbers in Irish universities, have led to a higher work intensity for staff. Studies of workload and intensity in Irish academics reveal disturbingly high levels of stress directly associated with pressure to teach more students and work longer hours and workaholism [32,84]. Low control is defined as how much say the person has in the way they do their work [98] and although traditionally academics would have been perceived as having high control in their work, there can be no doubt that this is a thing of the past. In Clarke et al.'s study of 1187 Irish academics, over two-thirds believed that

they had no influence in the wider institutional context, perceiving control of many aspects of their work to rest with the management team or school heads. Over half did not feel that they were kept informed about what goes on in the institution and lack of staff involvement in decision making was identified as a real problem. Only a very small percentage of the participants (13%) saw themselves as being 'very influential' in shaping policy [32].

While lip service is paid to stress and burnout, with any number of well-being, empathy and mindfulness initiatives encouraged, the focus is entirely on how individual staff members can increase their coping skills, rather than how the university processes are creating stressful working conditions and tensions. We argue that the focus on individualised well-being initiatives is not just incorrect and wasteful, we argue that it is damaging in its blind-eying of the real causes of stress and its failure to address these. Ferris, in her study of organisational responses to interpersonal bullying, found that the most damaging type of response is where there is an expectation of being valued and having one's difficulties listened to but then this fails to materialise, and targets feel betrayed by their employer [100]. The exponential increase in discourse on burnout in the academy is occurring with little meaningful engagement. At the time of writing, during the COVID-19 pandemic, academics find themselves in receipt of institutional communications that remind one of the importance of well-being and the need for taking of leave and rest breaks, while at the same time in constant receipt of email communications at any time, no longer confined to the working week/day. For many academics, this is little recognition of the difficulties of working while caring for dependents and/or home-schooling [101].

While the COVID-19 pandemic appears, at the time of writing, to be adding significantly to the stress of the university working environment, it provides the opportunity to focus on what matters—research and teaching. In this pandemic, there should be no expectation that staff engage in 'quality reviews', strategic planning or institutional evaluations (although the subtle erosion of trust in academics characteristic of the past decade gives rise to a sense that NPM policy will not allow for it). Such reviews are meaningless in a time of upheaval and organisational change. The only meaningful strategy is to ensure fair and equitable access to teaching and to facilitate staff to engage in methodologically robust and ethically sound research across the board. Adapting to online teaching and assessment affords academics the opportunity to consider carefully how they teach and to innovate in a meaningful and purposeful manner. Academics need to be trusted to do this. We are in the time of The Great Reset. Irony notwithstanding, we quote the chairperson of the world economy forum Schwab (2020), who advocates, "*this pandemic represents a rare but narrow window of opportunity to reflect, reimagine and reset our world.*" [102] (p. 1). We agree but perhaps for different reasons. We are aware of the growing inequalities that this pandemic has created, but we also are aware that NPM performativity cannot be fairly assessed in the context of the gendered effect on enforced homeworking on publication [103], for example. Fiscal challenges are looming post-pandemic. Our world as we know it will be radically altered [84].

9. Conclusions

As scholars who have dedicated their careers to the dignity and respect of the human being, we argue strongly that now is the time for us to reimagine the Irish university. Rather than continue with the demise of the intellectual, we advocate for the space to recreate an altruistic culture for the academy where the 'businessification' of education is no longer lauded as an assumed right and where bullying culture flourishes. In so doing, this paper is a first step, a call to arms as it were, in promoting a discourse of cultural change for the academy. Having reviewed key features of neoliberalism as it presents in higher education, we conclude that the managerial reforms that it has promised have in fact led to a range of pathologies that increase work-related stress and amount to institutional bullying. Acknowledging that this was not necessarily the intent of the reforms inherent in NPM, it appears to be what has transpired. Institutional bullying occurs when the policies and established practices in an organisation systematically

impose oppressive or damaging conditions on the individuals in the organisation. The practices required by the neoliberal project can be described as excessive monitoring, intense competitiveness and marketisation. The institution is responsible but may be blind to the way in which it is working and on the impact on the health and well-being of staff. Instead, ‘well-being initiatives’ offered to combat stress just facilitate the internalisation of the narrative of individual responsibility and even failure to perform. In the desire to manage and monitor output, as a measure of success in achieving the twin goals of universities, we may in effect be producing more and more output, but output that is in danger of being poorer, less inspired, and less critical. For universities to lose this tradition of critique is for them to lose their essence. The pandemic offers a potential moment in time to consider the direction we, as institutions, are hurtling towards and it offers an opportunity to pause for a significant reset.

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