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Volume 43, 2017 - [Issue 6](#)

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Higher education, unbundling, and the end of the university as we know it

Tristan McCowan

Pages 733-748 | Published online: 12 Jul 2017

Cite this article

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2017.1343712>



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Abstract

Unbundling is the process through which products previously sold together are separated into their constituent parts. In higher education, this dynamic has been driven primarily by financial motivations, and spearheaded by the for-profit sector, but also has pedagogical motivations through its emphasis on personalisation and employability. This article presents a theoretical analysis of the trend, proposing new conceptual tools with which to map the normative implications. While appearing to offer the prospect of financial viability and increased relevance, unbundling presents some worrying signs for universities: first, the removal of possible synergies between teaching and research, and between different modes of learning; second, the undermining of the ability of institutions to promote the public good and ensure equality of opportunity; and third, the threat of hyperporosity to the conducting of basic research with long-term benefits.

Keywords:

Commodification

for-profit higher education

future of the university

MOOCs

unbundling

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Tristan McCowan is reader in Education and International Development at the UCL Institute of Education, London. His work focuses on the areas of access to and quality of higher education, alternative and innovative universities, citizenship education and human rights, and covers a broad range of contexts, particularly in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. He is currently conducting multi-country research projects focusing on higher education pedagogy, graduate destinations and the public good in Africa, and is also involved in research on indigenous education in the Brazilian Amazon and Mexico. He is the author of *Rethinking Citizenship Education* (Continuum, 2009) and *Education as a Human Right* (Bloomsbury, 2013), and is editor of *Compare – a Journal of International and Comparative Education*.

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