

Discovering University Worlds: Detailed Description of the Proposed Research

Introduction: What is a university? In Canada, as elsewhere, it is a centre for research and teaching, supported in part by public funds. It is also an employer, a producer of images, a subject of rankings, a real estate owner, a generator of revenues, and a hub in global networks of value and aspiration. But how does a university work? What exactly does it do? What are the powers and pressures, the practices and networks that constitute contemporary university worlds?

Objectives: We are an interdisciplinary team of faculty at the University of Toronto driven to discover the many worlds of our institution in collaboration with graduate and undergraduate students. Unlike evaluators or management consultants, who might approach the university from the perspective of its financial viability or efficiency, we foreground the everyday experience of people who work or study in different corners of the institution, who live in its shadow, or respond to its public face, a project we position firmly in the humanities and social sciences. We anchor our study in the discipline of anthropology, which is committed to understanding entire systems of knowledge and practice in their densely interwoven social, cultural, linguistic, economic, material, and political dimensions. We also draw on combined strengths in socio-legal studies, human geography, history, women and gender studies, and international development.

Originality The University of Toronto is a rich site for investigation because it is both massive and diverse. Across its three campuses, professional schools, and relatively autonomous faculties and colleges, it covers a spectrum of university types, from elite research hub to mass undergraduate education. It is affected by the same material pressures that shape other Canadian universities, namely stagnation or withdrawal of state funding causing mass recruitment of international students, and an urgent search for donor funds to meet budget shortfalls. Contrary to some public perceptions, the University of Toronto is not a bastion of privilege or an ivory tower. Its students, faculty, staff and neighbors are extraordinarily heterogeneous, crossing divides of class, ethnicity, generation and nation. St. George is the oldest and largest campus, incorporating seven colleges; it is a significant owner of real estate in the city's downtown core. UT Scarborough and UT Mississauga are situated to the North East and North West in areas of high recent immigration; they account for 28,000 out of the total of 71,000 undergraduates. International students comprise 22% of students, of whom 60% (11,544) are from China.

While some scholars gloss contemporary universities with the label "neoliberal," applying this label does not substitute for empirical research into the workings of an actually-existing (semi) public university. A historical perspective confirms that not everything about the contemporary university is new. Medieval universities sought and received sponsorship from private corporations, religious orders, royal patrons, and individual donors. Early modern academies often served the political agendas and commercial interests of metropolitan elites, and recruited students and scholars from their ranks. Similarly, universities have always sought to burnish their public image, build their reputation, and attract scholars from far-off lands. Contemporary ranking systems (e.g. QS) intensify this practice, by quantifying reputations and rendering them commensurable in global terms. They also yield a plethora of professionalized jobs linked to the production of images, networking, and marketing.

Finally, universities have always been employers and owners of significant real estate. For the University of Toronto it is scale that makes these dimensions of crucial current importance: it is the city's largest employer, with over 27,000 full and part time staff, faculty, and librarians; its real-estate holdings in the downtown core make the university a powerful actor in municipal politics and courted

“partner” in commercial development schemes; and in the suburbs it reshapes neighbourhoods as international students buy houses, displacing recent immigrants.

Significance We propose to conduct pilot research on two main themes, and engage in collaborative knowledge production with U of T faculty, students, administrators and staff. Future research will involve formal collaboration with scholars based at **other Canadian and international** universities and colleges. We look forward to opportunities to compare, contrast, and deepen our knowledge. The two themes we have selected for pilot research open up strategic lines of inquiry into the multiple worlds of the university, and indicate the kinds of research we would like to do in a larger scale project.

Theme 1 University Mandates

Financial exigency, called by U of T president Gertler a “crisis” (Christopherson, Gertler, and Gray 2014), obliges contemporary universities to meet old mandates for research and teaching in new ways. With changing sources of finance come intensified requirements for accountability and audit that relocate authority and responsibility among units and actors, and favour some types of activity over others (Engelen, Fernandez, and Hendrikse 2014). Mandates have multiplied in ways that are sometimes captured in explicit text (like changing mission statements or strategic priorities), and sometimes embedded in everyday practices like accounting, approving documents, or presenting information. Within this field of scholarship, we pose two research questions:

1.1 Finance: How does the University work as financial actor? Like all public corporations the university uses both private sector practices and rationalities, and public sector ones; it is able to use both public law and private law; it is increasingly involved in public-private partnerships to build infrastructure and other investments; it is a real-estate owner; and it receives private donor funds. Its finances are correspondingly complex, as are the expectations of different stakeholders concerning accountability and transparency. For most students, faculty and staff, the university as a financial actor is a black box about which we know very little. Hence we seek to discover i) **Who decides** on major expenditures and new income streams, and how endowment funds are invested? How does the drive for donor funds and international student recruitment affect university governance and academic mission? How is income from patents and other intellectual property channeled? ii) **Who authorizes** financial decisions? What roles are played by the governing council, and by the financial markets on which U of T's debentures are sold? Over what kinds of financial decision do academic leaders of faculties, schools and other units have authority, and to whom are they responsible? iii) **How are assets, liabilities, and projected budgets presented, and to which stakeholders?** Do donors get more information than tuition-paying students or future retirees? What is the level of detail in financial reports, and how do formats shape their legibility for different publics? When is information made available, and how soon after decisions are made are they reported? How, in short, is transparency performed and for whom? (Valverde and Moore 2018)

1.2 Ethics: What is the ethical dimension of University comportment in its employment, research, and community engagement locally and globally? Although University restructuring is often presented as a technical matter governed by criteria of exigency and efficiency, we are interested in the ethical questions raised by technical framings, and the intractable trade-offs they seem to present. While the ethical dimension erupts periodically into the headlines with particular events (e.g. the notoriety of Jordan Peterson, a racist comment by a senior fellow of Massey College, Peter Munk's donation of funds generated abroad by mining giant Barrick Gold), we are interested in **ethical comportment** as reflected in the **everyday workings** of the institution as an **employer, neighbour, educator, recipient** and **investor** of public and private funds. The University aspires to be an excellent employer, for example,

yet a great many teaching and service staff work on contracts with low pay and no benefits. The University aspires to meet high standards for equity and inclusion, yet casual workers are mainly women and people of colour. Our aim is not to cast blame, but to **discover HOW, where, when, and by whom ethical questions** are addressed, or alternatively, how they are reframed as risks to be managed (Dale 2018), or issues that – though recognized as troubling – may effectively be set aside. We are also interested in considering **alternatives** that situate ethical comportment at the core of university worlds (Grey 2018, Undercommoning 2016).

Theme 2 Student Subjects

Students are the subject of both hope and fear. The hope, as expressed by students and their families, is that they will expand their horizons, graduate with good grades, and find good jobs. Provincial and federal governments hope that their investment in “human capital” will boost economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship. University administrators hope that qualified students will select U of T over its global competitors, and reward it with positive ratings for student experience, and generous donations of alumni funds. The fear is that damage will be done: students will drop out, or graduate with unpayable debt; innovation hubs will generate more costs than profits; and students (especially racialized, Indigenous, working class and international students) will experience multiple forms of exclusion and anxiety that the burgeoning apparatus of “student life” services cannot fully address. Amid such hopes and fears, the student as an active, thinking, multiply positioned subject tends to disappear. Our research will approach the student subject through 3 research questions.

2.1 Diversity: What is the relation between the diversity that is marketed by the university, and the one that is experienced by students? Does a diverse city lead to a diverse student body? Toronto is often lauded as **the world’s most diverse city** and the U of T’s two suburban campuses as the most diverse wings of this institution. But what processes and struggles does the language of diversity obscure? How do international, racialized, suburban, and working-class students navigate higher education? The navigation is in part spatial, as students move through racially marked spaces both on and off campus, and maintain transnational links to China, South Asia, the Philippines, and the Caribbean, among other places; it is also linguistic and cultural, as differently positioned students experience hidden “injuries” of class, ability and heteronormativity. Concretely, has **UTSC**, the focus of this sub-theme, become a place where peers forge new social and cultural relations, or is it a **polarized meeting point** for impoverished local students and relatively wealthy overseas students, both predominantly of colour?

2.2 Time: How do different temporalities shape student experience? Time management is a prominent theme of student life advisors as they attempt to guide students towards an optimal balance of study, exercise, leisure, and social interaction. Yet these **near-time management techniques** fit awkwardly with other temporalities – notably the **future-orientation** that frames the student’s time at university as merely a step towards employment (Read 2009, Nielsen and Sarauw 2018, Grant 2018). Students in career workshops are taught to instrumentalize their friendships, as friends become nodes in future business networks. Students facing long commutes, working to support their studies, stressed about debt or poor grades, or worrying over how to optimize course selection, international experience, and CV building, say they have no time to delve deeply into their studies. How then do they make time, spend time, and value time, past, present and future?

2.3 Mobilizations. Students experiencing challenges such as those outlined above are not passive. In different ways, and to different degrees, they actively engage in shaping the University, and crafting their own trajectories within it. How has students’ awareness of their own positionality within the university translated into particular forms of **activism and alliances**? How have practices of student

protest and critique **evolved over time**? What kinds of intersecting hierarchies of power have these practices helped reproduce or undermine? What are the circuits of mediation through which knowledge of past activism circulates to new generations of students? To answer these questions, we will analyze select cases of past and present student activism at UofT and develop a repository where print and digital ephemera from mobilized student groups can be digitally archived and annotated. **Anti-racist organizing by students** is one example, which we will explore through i) a history of the Transitional Year Program and the development of Writing Centres for students, which can be traced (in part) to anti racist organizing and the demand for support structures to promote access; ii) more recent student activism by the Black Students Association and the Black Liberation Collective.

Context

Scholarly Literature: The scholarly literature related to our themes is voluminous, and we can offer only a cursory list under three headings. 1) **The Marketization of Education:** Since the 1980s, studies have focused on the intensified inequalities that emerge from private K-12 schooling, US's "charter" schools, UK's "academies," and middle-class parents' choice strategies (Apple 2006; Ball 2003; Butler and Robson 2003; Mitchell 2006; Orfield and Frankenberg 2013; Ravitch 2010). A smaller literature has studied "neoliberalization" or "marketization" of universities, under the following often-separated topics: corporate and military influences, university ranking systems, faculty anxiety, and the racial segregation of cities (Giroux 2007; Marginson 2007; Lipman 2011; Mahoney and Weiner 2017; Loveday 2018; King-White and Beissel 2018).

2) **Ethnographies of Education:** Classics in this field focus on working class kids (Willis 1977), and the French professoriate (Bourdieu 1988). Recent work is reviewed by York University professor Dan Yon (2018). In relation to universities, there has been a division in the field between ethnographic studies of student life, and studies that focus on university policy and administration, approached through the lens of political economy and/or discourse analysis (Iloh and Tierney 2014; Pabian 2014; Gusterson 2017). Among the scant examples from Canada are a study of everyday life at York University (Esterik, Baker, and Kroy Collective 2014), and one on corporatization (Stone 2012). Useful models, for our purpose, are studies that explore how everyday practices of students, faculty, administrators and other actors both shape, and respond to, the political-economic and organizational environment of contemporary universities. A notable example is the large scale collaboration between European, Australian and New Zealand universities, which has produced both theoretical insights and reflections on methods (Shore and Davidson 2013; Shore and Wright 2018; on US see Tuchman 2009).

3) **Alternatives:** Assessments of university worlds range from nostalgic accounts of the (formerly great?) liberal university "in ruins" (Readings 1997; Collini 2017), or declining into a series of ethnic-identity bunkers (Heller 2016), to the argument that the (neo)liberal university was always exclusionary, and needs to be fundamentally rethought (Moten and Harney 2004, Undercommoning 2016, Edu-factory Collective 2009). Our pilot research approaches the question of alternatives by discovering the diverse practices that are already emerging in the University of Toronto's many worlds.

Theoretical Framework: Our study draws theoretical resources from across the social sciences and humanities, as expected in a multi-disciplinary research team. That said, the team shares some points of departure. Following Foucault (1982), the pioneering work of education scholar Dorothy Smith (2001), and key work by anthropologists on the social life of documents (Hull 2012, Riles 2006, Strathern 2006) we understand **power** as a pervasive feature of life in institutions, encoded in documents and the organization of space and time, and present in everyday social interactions. We are particularly interested in how power works to produce subjects, practices, and forms of knowledge. In the tradition

of Marx, we examine how the ownership of property, deployments of labour, and legal arrangements **distribute profit and loss unevenly across social groups**, and how unequal relations are entrenched, reproduced and legitimated. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1987, 1991), we expand our analysis beyond **economic “capital”** to recognize advantages provided by **“cultural,” “symbolic,” and “social” capital**. We are attentive to theorizations of race and class, and draw on studies such as those by Basil Bernstein (1971) and Paul Willis (1977) to help explain the failure of rapid post-war educational expansion to enhance the relative position of disadvantaged groups, or to sustain improved accessibility in the face of funding rollbacks (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Goldberg 2008). From studies that foreground **race, gender, class, sexual orientation**, and their **intersections**, we draw resources to examine not just the diverse composition of university staff, students and faculty, but also how the university organizes diversity to produce legitimating effects (Ahmed 2007). From **human geographers** such as Doreen Massey (1994) and Gillian Hart (2016), we have learned to attend not just to the spatial organization of daily life, neighbourhoods and institutions, but also to the sets of relations that are articulated together to produce the spatially concentrated but essentially unbounded configurations we call university worlds.

Methodology/ Research Strategy

Like other research on contemporary university worlds (Shore and Davidson 2013), the principal methods we will employ are a) ethnographic research in different corners of the university, eg labs, clubs, classrooms, dorms, offices, board-rooms; b) spatial mapping and related techniques for understanding changing social geographies; c) interviews; and d) analysis of the production, circulation and content of documents both on and off line, contemporary and historic, in the form of texts, images, and numbers, including accounts (Riles 2006, Hull 2012). We will seek approval from the university's ethics review board to cover the entire research team. If necessary we will initiate freedom of information requests to access administrative documents relevant to our research.

Research on the five sub-themes will be conducted by five **small research teams** of faculty and paid research trainees, lead by a faculty member. Undergraduate students in four university-focused research methods classes will also contribute original data and analysis. Student involvement is crucial since students - like faculty - have unique experiential knowledge. Through reflective techniques of "auto-ethnography" (Meneley and Young 2005) and “participant objectivation”(Bourdieu 2002), team members will deepen their knowledge of the university worlds they inhabit and bring it into dialogue with the knowledge of others who are differently positioned (as faculty, students, classed, racialized, gendered, abled, and transnational subjects). Joint faculty-student teams also foster collaboration and reduce hierarchy and alienation (Undercommoning 2016, Sturm and Turner 2018). We also use research workshops involving team members and the wider university community (faculty, students, administrators) as opportunities to learn from different perspectives, and expand the pool of potential research subjects who might be willing to participate in follow up interviews to deepen the exchange.

Specific research activities conducted by students will vary but to use sub-theme 2.1 **Students Subjects: Diversity** as an example, research will unfold as follows, a) the undergraduate course **Geographies of Education** will critically consider through its course material and discussions the various paths to and through UT Scarborough that students have taken, and the final assignment will ask students to write an “auto-ethnography” addressing this question; b) a top undergraduate will be recruited as a paid research trainee to continue this work c) supervised by a faculty member, the undergraduate and a graduate research trainee will undertake the following tasks: reviewing the use of “diversity” within current university material; obtaining and analysing aggregated university data on UTSC students according to income, gender, race, home location etc.; conducting and transcribing 50 interviews with students from different programmes; using Nvivo software (with training) to assess

patterns in students' paths (including paid work undertaken, courses/major taken, living situation and organization of time, etc.) with a special sensitivity to questions of race, gender, and class.

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