

# The uberization of education: Privatisation, pandemic and EdTech

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In this article I reflect on how the privatisation of education evolved over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of schools and universities disrupted the infrastructure of public education to an extent that was hardly imaginable before the pandemic. In some cases, this disruption produced a greater appreciation of teacher's labour and the teaching profession's ability to quickly adapt and respond to unprecedented circumstances. Families schooling children at home became acutely aware of the social and educational benefits of schools and gained an intimate appreciation of teachers' work. However, the pandemic also created new opportunities for the education technology

industry to accelerate the growth of new markets for their products and services, and to embed these in the infrastructure of public education much more rapidly than would have been possible otherwise.

The tension between these two effects of the pandemic has created an important new front for contests over global agendas to privatise education. Of course, the impacts of the pandemic and privatisation agendas have unfolded differently across time and place, but the pandemic has brought debates about the benefits and risks of replacing face-to-face teaching with education technologies into sharper focus.

In this article, I draw on my previous research into the commercialisation of schooling, and my current research into the digitalisation of the higher educa-

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tion industry, to argue that one particular aspect of privatisation now demands careful critical scrutiny. The privatisation of education can occur in at least two ways (Ball & Youdell 2008). First, private sector approaches can be imported into the public sector, to make education more like a business (privatisation of education). Second, the public sector can be opened up to private actors, involving them in the design, management and delivery of different aspects of public education (privatisation in education).

Often these two approaches often go hand in hand. However, in both cases the model of state-sponsored public education remains central. Privatisation in education grows from within this model, while privatisation of education shapes public education from without. At first glance, the Education Technology (EdTech) industry appears to contribute to the privatisation of education. This is certainly the case when schools and governments purchase their products or contract out services to EdTech companies through business-to-business transactions.

However, a specific type of privatisation of education is now emerging, and I would argue that it is sufficiently different to warrant its own description: the uberization of education. Uberization describes the disruption of an existing industry and its business models through the introduction of digital platforms that enable peer-to-peer transactions. Unlike other forms of privatisation, Uberization does not seek to alter the model of public education; rather, private actors aim to break this model by introducing new ways to sell education directly to customers. Uberization is not new, of course, but the disruption that Uber caused to the taxi industry has not yet occurred in education. However, I would argue that it has moved from an industry buzzword to an emergent reality, and it should be of greater concern to the teaching profession.

In 2017, I published a report on commercialisation in schooling for the New South Wales Teachers Federation with my colleagues Bob Lingard, Greg Thompson and Anna Hogan (Lingard et al. 2017). Our report was

based on a large survey of Australian educators, and we asked them to rate their concerns about the increased role of private interests in public schools. Their top two concerns were: (1) the ethics of student data being captured and used by private companies; and (2) public schools being run like businesses. The first concern relates to the privatisation of education and the second to privatisation in education.

The issues of least concern were: (1) the amount of time students spent in out-of-school private tutoring; (2) teacher activities being outsourced to private actors; and (3) the quality of commercial products. Each of these concerns relate to the uberization of education, which involves creating new ways for students to engage with teachers and commercial learning products outside of public education systems. Interestingly, the areas of least concern correlate with major growth areas for the global EdTech industry, particularly over the past twelve months.

Levels of venture capital investment in education have grown dramatically over the past decade and particularly during the pandemic (HolonIQ 2021). \$16 billion US dollars was invested in global EdTech in 2020, which is double the amounts invested in 2018 and 2019. This investment has made a small number of 'start-up' companies very valuable indeed, and these companies are referred to as 'unicorns'.

A 'unicorn' is a start-up company with a valuation over \$1 billion dollars. Unicorns do not include large, listed companies with established markets and so they provide us with a good indication of new emerging markets that investors are willing to bet 'big' on. In 2021 there were 25 EdTech unicorns globally and a third of them provided online tutoring, online alternative schooling, and online curriculum. These three growth areas correlate directly with the areas of least concern for educators in our Australian study.

The unicorns that offer online tutoring services are based in China and India and may seem distant from the concerns of educators in Europe and the Americas. But as the HolonIQ website explains, products in this

category “match tutors with student needs and provide interactive online class spaces for synchronous instruction” (HolonIQ 2021). These platforms are establishing an infrastructure that could potentially compete with the online delivery of public education.

One of the newest additions to the list of unicorns is Outschool, an alternative learning provider that raised \$75 million dollars in April 2021. The HolonIQ website argues that “[a]lternate education providers [like Outschool] ... have always been considered ‘outliers’ ... to the formal education system ... However, in search of better outcomes and frustrated with national systems, alternative providers are gaining traction ...” (HolonIQ 2021). Outschool offers a wide range of small-group classes online. It began as a platform for home schooling but has grown to cater for parents and young people who also want to supplement their schooling, similar to tutoring platforms. It has enrolled nearly 1 million students across 174 countries and teachers on the platform have delivered more than 6 million hours of class time. Outschool is an important example because the company explicitly offers an alternative model of education, rather than aiming to sell products or services to public schools or governments.

In both cases—online tutoring and alternative schooling—EdTech start-ups are building platforms that do exactly what many public educators have been doing over the past twelve months: providing online class space for synchronous teaching and learning, thereby offering an alternative to national education systems.

The private sector can, and does, make valuable contributions to public education (e.g., videoconferencing platforms that enabled teaching and learning to continue online). These contributions can be beneficial if they are transparent and support equitable approaches to sustaining public education for all students. Importantly, these contributions should be shaped by teacher professional judgement and held to the teaching profession’s standards of practice. But this is not the case with many new digital platforms, particularly when the education provided by these platforms is developed

and delivered by instructors who are not qualified. For example, Outschool does not require its teachers to hold formal teaching credentials.

As the recent UNESCO report on Education in a post-COVID world argues that: “Public education cannot be defined and controlled by content and methods built outside of the pedagogical space and outside of the human relationships between teachers and students” (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). This statement draws a line that must be maintained in relation to the privatisation of education, but it does not recognise the growth of pedagogical spaces and relationships between teachers and students outside of public education and the oversight of the teaching profession. The growth of these spaces presents us with new challenges.

So how should the profession respond? The centrality of the model of public education in the first two kinds of privatisation affords a basis for resistance focused on protecting the model from the growth of privatisation from within or the influence of private actors from without. However, the uberization of education does not seek to change public education in the same way; rather, it offers an alternative model in an attempt to break the established one.

Our first response must be to better understand and recognise this form of privatisation and its potential impacts on public education. The second challenge is to counter its negative impacts. We can, of course, look to examples of regulatory mechanisms that have been used to impose standards and restrictions on ride sharing companies like Uber. However, simply inhibiting the growth of new models will not be enough. Indeed, this approach risks playing into the narrative of the EdTech industry and their allies, who frequently present teachers as obstacles to innovation concerned with defending the status quo rather than meeting the changing needs of students and families. Flawed new models of education must be challenged, but existing models of public education must also be reimaged.

In their recent report for Education International on the privatisation of education in the context of COVID, Ben Williamson and Anna Hogan describe how key figures in the tech world have, and I quote, 'been given positions of authority as experts in "reimagining" education for the future' (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p.2). The uberization of education is a key element in this work of reimagination, and we must develop other imaginaries in which the model of public education cannot simply be sustained but remains more desirable than uberized alternatives.

While the pandemic created fertile conditions for further privatization of education, and for this new form of privatization to gain traction, it has also reminded people of the importance of schools as public spaces and the contribution made to communities and society at large by the teaching profession. So, the pandemic also creates fertile conditions for strengthening recognition of what public education offers that private digital platforms cannot. This recognition can provide a basis for collective efforts not only to repair the disrupted infrastructure of public education, but to enhance and promote its most important qualities at the same time.

As Berlant (2016) writes, 'the reinitializing of a system that has been stalled by a glitch [can] involve local patching or debugging... while not generating

a more robust or resourceful apparatus.' The coming uberization of education suggests the need to build back public education systems in ways that generate a more robust apparatus, keeping in mind emerging threats to public education created by new forms of privatisation. While we must continue to challenge forms of privatization that damage the model of public education from within and without, we must also re-imagine new futures for public education that remain more desirable than growing alternatives.

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## **Outschool.com as an example of the Uber of education**

**Outschool is an online platform that matches individuals who want to teach a course (no teacher qualifications needed) with students who sign up to take the course. The teacher designs the class and produces an ad, designating the time it is offered online and the cost. The platform advertises the course, links the student and teacher, and collects the fee online.**

**Outschool keeps 30% of the fee and sends the rest to the person offering the course. A course may have several sessions, and a fee is generally charged for each session individually. It claims to offer more than 140,000 different classes and encourages schools to sign up students for its courses. Outschool views the teacher as a small-business entrepreneur and students and parents as consumers and customers, rather than learners and citizens.**