

The Zombie University System Produces Zombified Students: The Depletion Harms of the Extractive University

Leon A. Salter and Lisa Vonk*

Abstract

This article draws on research with Massey University students to argue the contemporary zombie university system produces zombified students—by depleting them of their capacity to care for themselves and others. The ‘zombie university’ retains the name and façade of a university, but is hollowed out, no longer functioning for the public good, but for the extraction of private profit. Our data comprised 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, 3 focus groups and a survey ($n = 92$), with current students (undergraduate and postgraduate), between May and December 2023, a period of unprecedented cuts to staff and teaching programmes. We found that despite increasing recognition by the university of wellbeing as an issue, the cuts accelerated the zombification process and signalled an uncaring attitude from leadership, while adding a multiplicity of high-stress life issues, such as health concerns, caring responsibilities and financial troubles. The latter meant long working hours in low-paid work, in addition to unpaid care labour (iniquitously affecting women and Māori). A sense of emotional depletion was endemic to the student participants, whereby they had little time or energy to care for others or themselves, beyond ensuring productivity; in other words, they were zombified. We conclude by considering the broader implications for society’s capacity for social reproduction.

Key words: zombie university; cannibal capitalism; depletion; extraction; social reproduction

Introduction

This article draws on research with Massey University students to argue that the contemporary *zombie university* (a hollowed-out institution for the public good in name only), together with the broader colonial capitalist system it sits within, produces *zombified students*—by depleting them of their capacity to care for themselves and others. As Nancy Fraser (2023) has argued, capitalism cannibalises care, exploiting it for profit while creating the stressful and alienating conditions where more care is needed, depleting individual capacities for resilience and collective capacities for social reproduction. This downward spiral has the greatest impact on those whom society expects to care the most: women and People of Colour, causing “depletion harms” (Rai, 2024), sapping energy and damaging physical and mental wellbeing.

In the Keynesian ideal, well-functioning universities were positioned as playing a crucial role in healthy democratic societies, through sustaining the public sphere and instilling democratic ideals in young people (Brown, 2015; Dewey, 1916/1997). While it is questionable whether this ideal was ever fully reached, and we do not want to over-idealise the pre-1990s university, it has been well-documented that the university has been subject to a radical transformation over the past 40 years from its prior framing as a public institution which, through its teaching and research, contributes to the good of the demos (public)

* Leon Salter is a senior lecturer in the Social Sciences at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland.

Email: leon.salter@auckland.ac.nz

Lisa Vonk is an independent researcher and teacher based in Aotearoa New Zealand.

(Brown, 2015). Under neoliberal hegemony, the fundamental purpose of the university has been reconfigured to centre on private rather than public good (Giroux, 2017), with research increasingly oriented around profit-making, and teaching around vocational training (Andrew, 2024; Szadkowski & Krzeski, 2025). Concurrently, student subjectivity has been reconfigured to an entrepreneurial orientation, where one must centre and constantly optimise the self in order to get by in an ultra-competitive environment (Andrew, 2024; Bellesia et al., 2019). In this context, the university becomes a zombie institution, retaining the connotations of a public institution with its links to the reproduction of democracy, but hollowed out from the inside (Andrew, 2024; Brabazon, 2016).

In this article we wish to go beyond arguing for the crucial role universities play in democratic reproduction by also highlighting their (potential) role in *social reproduction*. In other words, we should consider how teaching and research care for both the self and society: we care for ourselves through our work in universities, while at the same time we contribute to the reproduction of the university and society, in a relational, reciprocal relationship (Connell, 2019). We refer to *care* here in a broad sense as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fisher and Tronto, cited in Rai, 2024, p. 7).

Conversely, however, the dominant logic of the zombified Western university is one of extraction, rather than care (Chan et al., 2023; Maury, 2020). Guided by the ideals of *New Public Management* (NPM), university leaders focus on extracting a surplus from students in a tightened funding environment, rather than conducting teaching or producing research (Tolofari, 2005). At the same time, contemporary Western university students live relatively precarious lives in comparison with previous generations (Burr et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022). This has certainly been the case in Aotearoa New Zealand. As well as shifting the purpose of the university, the neoliberalisation of tertiary education has seen progressive cuts to student support, together with the introduction of, and then incremental increases in, course fees, contributing to mounting student loan debt (Roper, 2018). Recently, these pressures have been exasperated by increasing cost-of-living pressures, particularly for accommodation in the main urban centres (Point & Associates, 2022). As a result, most students need to find at least part-time paid employment (sometimes full-time) to sustain their studies, while studying full-time, which can contribute to stress and anxiety (Salter & Vonk, forthcoming). Many tertiary students are constantly struggling to “walk the wire” (Taylor, 2022), carefully balancing work, studies and caring responsibilities, increasing their need for human connection and a university oriented around care ethics, rather than extraction (Chan et al., 2023).

Massey University in 2023 is a particularly illuminating example of how the ideology of NPM reframed the COVID-19 income crisis (loss of international student revenue) as one of public sector inefficiency, imposing an unprecedented level of cuts to courses and staff, while justifying a top-down ‘Digital Plus’ strategy of shifting face-to-face teaching to online learning, thereby accelerating zombification trends. Cuts to courses and staff created substantial anxiety and uncertainty for our student research participants, already struggling with the disruptions of COVID-19, mental health and cost-of-living crises, while balancing work, study and care (Point & Associates, 2022). Through our analysis of 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, 3 focus groups and a survey ($n = 92$), we found five theoretically informed themes of the effects of the zombie university system: *pressures; frustration; alienation/isolation; depletion; and extraction*.

In the conclusion, we focus on the *collective* effects of the zombie university system, with its depleted ability to care (Rai, 2024) on students, their families and their communities. Through this focus, we want to make a theoretical argument that re-claims the notion of the public university; but one that moves beyond the free exchange of ideas and is grounded in the everyday struggles and care labour of students. Before that, we define what we mean by the zombie university and its depletion effects, after which we illustrate our theoretical arguments through the voices of Massey University students.

Zombies and cannibals: The extractive university, care and depletion

Universities in New Zealand (as in many other OECD countries), since the 1980s, have progressively become governed by a neoliberal logic (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2017; Roper, 2018). The Keynesian framing of the university as an engine of equality and public good, with a mandate to educate good citizens and maintain “culture, civilisation and liberal democracy” (Roper, 2018, p. 15) has been steadily replaced by the idea that education and research are commodities that benefit individual consumers or companies, rather than wider society (Narayan & Stittle 2018).

Lately, neoliberalism has progressed to a new phase so that the university (as wider society) has become increasingly financialised (Davis, 2018; Vallyelly, 2023), becoming more tightly coupled to extractive forms of production (Chan et al., 2023). Rather than placing an emphasis on conducting teaching or producing research, the university has become focused on extracting a surplus from students in the form of tuition fees, which are especially high for international students (Chacko, 2021; Gilmartin et al., 2021), and in the form of rent for increasingly expensive student halls (Hastings et al., 2024). As Chan et al. (2023) have highlighted, the move towards online learning with a concurrent encroachment of digital learning platforms has furthered this extractive logic, with students often unknowingly having their data extricated for lucrative predictive analytics and training AI models.

Decisions to increase the platformisation of university teaching can be shrouded in the discourse of student choice, flexibility and empowerment, but are often motivated by a desire to outsource teaching infrastructure to save labour costs (Hall, 2016; Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022). Constrained funding environments, corporate governance, hierarchical management structures, and the influence of NPM combine to prioritise the maintenance of a short-term financial surplus (Broucker & De Wit, 2015). The implementation of NPM into universities has varied considerably across national contexts (Broucker & De Wit, 2015), but its main tenets include the installation of market mechanisms, with various forms of competition, as well as performance measurement and management (Broucker & De Wit, 2015; Lapsley & Miller, 2024; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2024). Furthermore, NPM values strong centralised management, at the expense of academic professional autonomy. In this context, academic professional autonomy is suspected of being motivated by self-interest, while lacking market discipline (Broucker & De Wit, 2015; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2024; Tolofari, 2005). University leadership teams, by contrast, are set aside as the experts, holding both a broader and longer-term strategic view, and an objective, technocratic ability to make judgements through privileged access to performance data (McCann et al., 2020; Wang, 2026). NPM is therefore closely aligned with audit culture (Shore & Wright, 2024), which ensures that all university expenditure must be value for money (VFM), and only the measurable is valued, to the detriment of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, as well as collegiality between staff and caring relationships between staff and students.

Perpetual cuts and restructures to promote efficiency and stronger market discipline henceforth become the order of the day in the contemporary neoliberal university (Broucker & De Wit, 2015; Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022; Szadkowski & Krzeski, 2025). And as McCann et al. (2020) have noted, lately university leadership has taken an authoritarian turn, imposing cuts and restructures by force, “becoming increasingly autocratic as marketization intensifies” (p. 431).

Scholars have characterised the resulting context as the “zombie university” (Andrew, 2024; Brabazon, 2016; Fleming, 2021), which retains the name and outward façade of a university (with its connotations of a public institution) but has been hollowed out from the inside. Devoid of human purpose, a body without a soul, it staggers on, parasitically feeding on the brains of staff and students. In this article, we argue that the zombie university also feeds on the care labour of students, creating a zombifying effect by depleting them of their capacity to care for themselves and others. As Domingo (2018) argues, in the zombie dystopia, individual resilience becomes the only route to survival, for fear of becoming one of the

walking dead (the redundant unemployed or unemployable). To cope, and to ensure they are producing satisfactory performance metrics, students must adopt an entrepreneurial orientation, a subjectivity that coalesces trends towards competitive individualism in the world of work, and which cannot afford too many outward displays of care for others (Bellesia et al., 2019; Fleming, 2017). As put by Andrew (2024), “performance has no room for caring” (p. 29), and the ‘value’ of spending time with friends and family must be calculated and weighed up against opportunities to improve the CV. The *homo economicus*, individualist, entrepreneurial orientation is the normative (but not the only) student response to the zombie university (Salter & Vonk, forthcoming).

Paradoxically, however, resilience must be built through collective repairs to our social world. In other words, , which requires affective and relational caring practices (Tronto, 1998, 2010). As Fraser (2023) maintains, capitalism both relies on and exploits this paradox, “free riding on unwaged carework” (p. 133), while at the same time disavowing its crucial role in sustaining communities through the ideological dominance of competitive individualism and patriarchal gender norms. Evoking another powerful dystopian metaphor, for Fraser capitalism “cannibalises” care—exploiting it for profit (commodification) while creating the stressful and alienating conditions where more care is needed. Hence, while moments of care continue for and by students (such as providing relational support to peers; see Staniforth, 2025), they are cannibalised by the zombie university, allowing an otherwise unsustainable, extractive, exploitative system to continue.

Cuts and restructures (where the university is literally cannibalising itself) can also erode collective capacity for care, while providing a significant source of anxiety and stress for students (Andrew, 2024; Chan et al., 2023; Haiven & Komporezos-Athanasios, 2022). Reduced numbers of academic and administrative staff results in higher workloads for those who remain, meaning less time to spend in face-to-face engagement, and less capacity for building caring relationships (Andrew, 2024; Chan et al., 2023). Cuts also signal an uncaring attitude from leadership, through the “the banality of carelessness” (Chatzidakis et al., 2020), which, although not explicitly purposeful, saps “energies needed to tend to families, maintain households, sustain communities, nourish friendships, build political networks, and forge solidarities” (Fraser, 2023, p. 62). As Rai (2024) notes, this sapping of energy creates “depletion harms”, causing more damage to physical and mental wellbeing, in a circular motion. While depletion is felt collectively, “fundamentally affect[ing] the material conditions of reproduction and maintenance of social life” (p. 4), it also has unequal effects, affecting individuals who care the most: women, People of Colour, and the working class. The result is “tiredness, loneliness, and an erosion of self” (p. 17), affecting our “interpersonal intimacies” (p. 14), or our ability to care for ourselves and others.

Further contributing to depletion, many students, particularly those from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds, now must work longer and longer hours in paid employment, during semester time, in order to sustain themselves financially (Antonucci, 2017; Taylor, 2025).

While limited nationally representative data has been collected, a Ministry of Education (2019) report showed that 81 per cent of New Zealand domestic university students juggle study and work, with almost 60 per cent of full-time students working during semester time. Women were more likely than men to be in paid employment, and also more likely to have caring commitments. There was a concerning correlation in the report between working more than 20 hours per week and declining course completion rates. Beban and Trueman (2018) found a similar correlation between length of hours worked and lower grades in their study of Massey University students. It is safe to assume that this situation has worsened post-COVID, as cost-of-living pressures have accelerated with minimal rises in student support. A post-COVID Green Party/NZUSA survey found that for those living in Wellington or Auckland, approximately half of the student’s income was taken up by rent alone (Point & Associates, 2022). That survey also identified concerning trends in student mental health, with 69 per cent of students reporting that this was

significantly depleted during the pandemic (Point & Associates, 2022). “Stress trying to balance work and study commitments” was also cited as a key concern.

The following section provides more detail and background on the Massey University example and how it illustrates broader trends towards the zombification of the New Zealand university system, which we argue will only worsen these depletion effects on students.

Massey University in 2023: Cuts and the banality of carelessness

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuro | Massey University originated as an agricultural college located in Te Papa-i-Oea Palmerston North, gaining university status in 1964. The 1990s then saw a period of expansion, with the opening of the Auckland and Wellington campuses, which have subsequently become a financial burden, contributing to high administrative and infrastructure costs, being spread across three campuses traversing the North Island. These costs then became a particular issue with a decline in student enrolments across the 2019–2024 period (Ellingham, 2024). Hence, enrolments were already in decline pre-COVID, but the pandemic saw the particularly painful loss of international student revenue (a lucrative point of extraction that became a crutch for the entire tertiary system; see Meur et al., 2014, for an early warning).

Already by May 2020, then-Vice Chancellor Jan Thomas was extolling the virtues of “living within our means”, as well as being “part of the solution not part of the problem”, through “Spotify[ing] the learning experience” (Thomas, 2020), whereby teaching is rendered more efficient by becoming digitised, platformised and tailored to student (read customer) consumption patterns. The latter was a new, COVID-led justification for the implementation of the *Digital Plus* strategy, which had been shelved in 2019 due to staunch staff opposition. Digital Plus aimed to create efficiencies by “remov[ing] unnecessary duplication” between campuses—meaning courses would no longer be taught face-to-face across the three campuses; instead there would be (at maximum) “one ‘physical’ campus for on-campus delivery”, with “online delivery” becoming the new norm (Massey University, 2023).

A financial deficit of \$8.8 million in 2022 and a projected deficit of \$41 million for 2023 then became the pretext for more severe cuts in academic programmes, courses and staff. The self-styled “SLT” (Senior Leadership Team) proposed up to 245 staff redundancies during the course of 2023 (Tertiary Education Union, 2023), with the costs of redundancy payouts (\$19 million) contributing to almost half of the projected deficit of \$41 million, leaving open the justification for yet further cuts (Gerritsen, 2024). In terms of courses, 624 were “retired” in 2023 (one sixth of all courses), with far more moving to single physical campus delivery, or online only (Ellingham, 2024).

Massey was not the only New Zealand university to undergo cuts to staff and courses in the wake of the pandemic (Oldfield et al., 2021). Indeed, most struggled with the loss of international student revenue, instigating job and course cuts to tackle financial deficits, including Victoria University Wellington, Auckland University of Technology (AUT), University of Otago and University of Waikato. Indeed, our argument is that Massey is a symptom of broader structural and cultural issues that lie deeply within New Zealand’s university system. Drawing on Massey University as an example has value in highlighting the shortcomings of an NPM approach to crises such as COVID, which views top-down decision-making and cuts to staff and courses as the only way out of an income crisis that is broadly structural and deeply political, but which is blamed on public sector inefficiency. Hence, the possibility of democratic approaches that take into account the views and impacts on all affected parties is negated, as well as that of drawing on the wide range of expertise in the staff and student bodies for alternative routes out of crises.

Methods

Following ethical approval (Massey ethics reference number 4000025765), data collection began for the *Massey Student Experiences of Work and Wellbeing* project. The project comprised 20 in-depth, semi-structured

interviews, 3 focus groups and a survey ($n = 92$), with current Massey University students (undergraduate and postgraduate), and data were collected between May and December 2023. For recruitment, advertising posters were circulated on the student association's social media sites, on physical notice boards, and internal course pages. The poster contained a QR code with a link to a Microsoft Form, where potential student participants provided basic demographic data, and were also given the opportunity to read the information sheet and provide consent.

Notably, both authors were Massey University staff during 2023 when the data were collected. One author was a PhD student who also taught, and the other was on a research-only contract who had previously taught at Massey. This meant the authors were aware of the stresses and pressures felt by Massey students, as well as the tendency for their voices to be ignored by decision-makers. However, it also introduced a potential conflict of interest, as students' experiences with teaching staff were being solicited. To mitigate this, researchers were up front about their positionality. Researcher names were circulated with the recruitment notice so that students knew from the outset who was associated with the project. Students had the option of selecting the interviewer they worked with and were made aware that both researchers had access to the data.

While we had our overarching theme of the impacts of student paid work on their ability to find time to study and their mental health and wellbeing, we also wanted to make the research as participant-led as much as possible, reducing the impact of our own presuppositions as well as power imbalances between 'researcher' and 'researched' (Dutta, 2018; Elers et al., 2021). Accordingly, one online focus group was run at the start of the project (open to both undergraduate and postgraduate students), to gather student feelings and concerns around balancing studies and paid work and its effects on wellbeing, which fed into the interview themes and survey questions. Interviews were then run over Zoom and were in-depth and semi-structured, with a list of themes to address around work, studies, housing, money and wellbeing, but adapted to individual student circumstances. We used Zoom's auto-transcription service to create a first draft of the transcripts, which were then checked for accuracy by a research assistant. The second and third focus groups then drew on the interview data, concentrating on some of the specific (and sometimes different) concerns raised by undergraduate and postgraduate students (particularly international PhDs). Finally, the survey investigated similar themes to the interviews and focus groups, but could reach a wider student body (particularly distance students, of which Massey has a high proportion). The survey comprised a mix of quantitative multiple choice and qualitative open-ended questions, the latter giving respondents the space to elaborate on themes.

Qualitative data from the interviews, focus groups and survey were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017), where initial descriptive codes were generated before merging these into broader, theoretically informed themes, based around the effects and affects of the zombie university system on students (see also Tracy, 2019). Both authors initially coded each transcript from the interviews and focus groups individually, keeping separate codebooks, which were later discussed before agreeing on the most prominent themes. Selected open-ended survey questions were also quantitatively content-analysed, whereby themes were counted to draw out the most resonant (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Quotations from the transcripts and open-ended survey questions are reproduced below, with names replaced by pseudonyms and any other identifying information removed or changed slightly to ensure confidentiality.

Analysis: Depletion harms and the consequences of caring for students

In this section we draw on the 20 interviews, 3 focus groups and a survey ($n = 92$ respondents) to illustrate the depletion harms on students of an extractive zombie university system, as well as their paid work and the wider colonial capitalist system. We also highlight the unequal burden that caring for others places on

women (particularly wāhine Māori), as well as the inequities that exist for students who lack financial support from family or whānau.

Prominent themes from thematic and analysis of the interviews, focus groups and content analysis of the survey (open-ended questions) illustrating the effects of the zombie university system are outlined in Table 1 below. Across three subsections (institutional cuts and service provision, temporal pressures, and care depletions), these closely interconnected themes are explicated and collectively discussed.

Table 1: Prominent themes

Theme	Description
Pressures	Multiple concurrent pressures: temporal, financial, family, emotional. Juggling priorities between studies, work, family and friends. Can cause stress, loss of sleep, feelings of isolation.
Frustration	Feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness and anxiety for the future. Worsened by the cuts with lack of information. Also bureaucratic lack of care—not only in the university but in the broader education, immigration and employment systems.
Alienation/isolation	Dehumanisation of education through digitalisation, isolation from family and friends.
Depletion	Expending energy in employment and affective/care labour without being able to replenish. Adverse effects on the body, health and energy.
Extraction	High fees, rent and cost of living with diminishing returns from the university in services or potential future career.

Institutional cuts and service provision

As outlined earlier, during the data collection period Massey University was progressing a massive programme of cuts to professional and academic staff, as well as to programmes and courses. Furthermore, many courses were shifted from being offered both in-person and online to online only, or only offered in-person at one of Massey's three campuses (Te Papa-i-Oea Palmerston North, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, and Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington). These cuts seemed to lay bare the logic of **extraction** for some of our student participants, who complained that they signalled a lack of care from management. Summer, a Pākehā domestic undergraduate student based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, believed that despite many lecturers and tutors “giving a shit”, “university management really doesn't care [about student mental health] as long as they've got the cheques rolling in”. Similarly, Lucilla, an international PhD student from Europe based in Te Papa-i-Oea Palmerston North, was concerned her supervisor could lose their job, because: “If you change the topic or the supervisor, it's like the worst thing you could do to me.” At the same time, she showed empathy towards the plight of undergraduate students who were having their courses cut, a caring orientation which added to her own sense of depletion:

They [university management] clearly don't give a shit about their students being us or undergrad, because now undergrads have to change fucking cities to go study, like this is a lot of money and Palmy is not the most expensive one. Like if they have to go to Wellington now, that's a lot of money and I think this is the one that's stressing me the most.

The cuts were also a major concern, and source of **frustration**, **extraction** and **alienation/isolation**, for students who responded to the survey. Content analysis of the survey open-ended question “What do you think Massey University could be doing to help improve things for their students?” showed that cuts were

the primary topic on 12 occasions. Comments emphasised students' frustration, and were commonly focused on the poor quality of communication around what the cuts would mean for individual programmes and courses, as well as decreasing trust in management, who were accused of intentionally withholding information. Furthermore, the cuts added to a sense of disruption, uncertainty and anxiety for students, many of whom had recently had their studies and lives severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The cuts were also the primary concern for five students when asked the open-ended question "What is stressing you out the most right now?". When not the primary topic, the cuts were regularly mentioned in tandem with other high-stress life issues, such as health concerns, caring responsibilities and financial troubles.

The institutional context, in some instances, was a source of **depletion** for some students. The majority of the survey respondents were positive towards student support services, with over half finding them either "helpful" or "very helpful". However, the ambivalent "neither helpful nor unhelpful" was the most common individual answer (37 per cent), while the interviews revealed some alienating experiences of overly bureaucratic systems that failed to centre student health or wellbeing. Ivy, a domestic undergraduate student based in Palmerston North, recounted a particularly revealing narrative: when she fainted in the halls during her first week at university, there was a delay to her receiving medical care because her enrolment paperwork hadn't been fully processed:

The duty RA [residential assistant] contacted the health hub, the little doctors on campus... Massey wouldn't let me in because I didn't have the paperwork... And the duty RA can't drive the students unless it's like a Massey van, so I had to go in an ambulance.

While indicative of a "banality of carelessness" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020) common to many bureaucracies, not only neoliberal extractive ones, these kinds of experiences were likely to become more common following cuts to professional support staff, whereby administrators would be under significant time and workload pressures. Linked to this, several of the interview participants complained of long waiting lists for appointments with counsellors, sometimes up to two months. This scarcity of a vital resource for students during a highly vulnerable time of their lives, signified an uncaring attitude from management for these students, as well as contradicting the promotion of the new wellbeing framework, which promises that wellbeing "is a top priority" for the university (Massey University, 2026a).

For some of the interview participants, the move towards online learning, which began in the early years of the pandemic but was accelerated by the cuts, enhanced a sense of **alienation/isolation** and was also **depletive**. For these participants, the shift had a dehumanising effect, impacting wellbeing as well as degrading the learning process. Chris, a domestic undergraduate student of mixed heritage (Pākehā and Māori) based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, noted how both his papers in the current semester had online lectures, whereas the two papers he had taken in the previous semester had face-to-face lectures. He remarked how the face-to-face lecture format forces him to give his full attention for an hour, so "you're taking in more information". In contrast, you "have to schedule in [online lectures, and], find the time to watch them", alongside other commitments such as paid work, with more capacity for distraction from phones and other digital devices.

For some of our interview participants, the reality of cuts and digitisation represented a lack of care and set up a sense of contradiction with the university's wellbeing goals. Summer, who worked 60 hours a week as a duty manager in a bar, disengaged with the wellbeing discourse to such an extent that they used the time when lecturers began to talk about it as an opportunity to catch up on their sleep. Several of the interview participants also complained about long waiting times to see counsellors, further contradicting claims that Massey was making student wellbeing a "top priority" (Massey University, 2026b). Krista, whose co-workers and flatmates even pointed out that she was "like a zombie", had to access counselling through

her employer's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) service, because of the long waiting lists at the university.

Temporal pressures

The institutional and broader structural context of university study was experienced as a source of **pressure** for the study participants. Several students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) talked about needing to pre-schedule time with friends and family, due to temporal and workload **pressure**. Chris mentioned how "It's hard to catch up with people during the day" because he works 18 hours a week at a men's clothing shop, on top of full-time study. Because of this, "Sometimes you just have to schedule it into your calendar to go and do something or hang out with a friend, or or just do something for yourself." Chris's 18 hours of paid work was around average for the undergraduate students we interviewed, with many working longer.

In an extreme example of temporal **pressure**, Summer (nonbinary/third gender) worked around 60 hours a week as a night duty manager in a bar; a high-stress job, requiring constant depleting affective labour in dealing with customers, as well as a huge amount of responsibility for the care and wellbeing of employees, in a potentially dangerous environment. Sometimes they would be responsible for as many as "13 girls running around trying to serve drinks to drunk people". Balancing this work with full-time study, Summer gets little time for sleep, let alone time to consider the university's wellbeing initiatives. They confess that when "the lecturers start talking about that kind of stuff, [I think] 'Cool, sweet, I can go to sleep for like 10 seconds'". They also admitted to taking a strategic approach to catching up on sleep during lectures, when it's on "something that I already know about ... I can probably like slip into a little nap if I'm careful about it".

The tension and stress involved in juggling paid work and study for undergraduate students was reflected in both the survey and the interviews. Thirty-three per cent of the survey respondents named this as a key stressor. Multiple survey respondents described the toll that juggling paid employment and studies was taking on their health and wellbeing. One full-time domestic undergraduate distance respondent worked 16–20 hours a week in hospitality, despite suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). In response to the open-ended question "What is stressing you out the most right now?", she described health as her number one stressor and was explicit that "working on top of studying full-time is stressful and taxing on my body". This student lacked financial support from family, which exacerbated her sense of isolation and pressure.

Describing the **pressures** of balancing work and study and social life, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington undergraduate student Krista, who worked 20 hours a week at a department store, said: "My co-workers and flatmates were like, 'You're like a zombie. You're going to classes. You look dead and like you just feel like you have the whole world on your shoulders'." She described how she was struggling with mental health issues, compounded by illness and the stress of finding suitable accommodation. She had been staying in university-run student halls, but these were overcrowded and of poor quality, further depleting her sense of health and wellbeing. As well as the lifts not working for a long period during the pandemic lockdown (adding to her sense of isolation as it was more difficult to leave her flat), she also contracted COVID, linked to the overcrowded conditions. Furthermore, while students may get extensions for individual assessments, most often this does not decrease the overall work required to pass a course, with successive illnessness therefore adding to her stress and depleting her wellbeing, which then had a circular negative impact on her bodily health.

In addition, students studying certain professionally accredited courses, such as nursing, veterinary science and social work (which have disproportionately high amounts of female students and involve greater amounts of care labour), have to undertake unpaid placements. One undergraduate veterinary student who contributed to a focus group was "working 7 days a week" during her placement—with full-time placement

work during the week followed by paid work on the weekend. She also described how she would have to secure her own accommodation in remote rural locations for these placements. It was left up to the discretion of individual farmers whether they would provide free accommodation, otherwise she could be paying rent in two concurrent locations (her term-time rent in Te Papa-i-Oea Palmerston North plus her placement accommodation). Adelle, a full-time domestic student of African heritage, criticised “a lack of information for [her veterinary] placement” provided by Massey. While required to undertake an unpaid placement as part of her course, “They don’t really give a lot of information. You kind of have to figure that out yourself”, meaning she was left on her own to find and then arrange the placement.

Temporal pressures were felt most acutely by those without familial support. Seventy-nine per cent of those with family support felt they spent enough time studying, while just 47 per cent without support did. And while it’s difficult to make statistical claims with a small sample size, of the 68 students who lacked family support, 34 (50 per cent) were working in paid employment for more than 20 hours per week during semester time, with 16 (24 per cent) working between 36 and 40 hours and one student working more than 40 hours per week. Antonucci (2017) reminds us that private financial support has become a marker of class and a key driver of inequality in the contemporary university, as public financial support from governments dries up. Rather than being a pathway through which working-class students can climb the social ladder, “we are witnessing a reinforcement of inequality in the paths of transition through university” (p. 2). In our survey, undergraduate students lacking financial support from their families were much less likely to feel that they spent enough time studying, as they were much more likely to be working longer during semester time, limiting their capacity for deep scholarly engagement and ability to become involved in campus clubs and activities.

Care depletions

In addition, temporal **pressures** were felt acutely and were a key source of **depletion** for those with significant care responsibility. Two of our interviewees were wāhine Māori working towards a postgraduate vocational degree. They were required to undertake unpaid placements, which, when added to caring responsibilities, placed considerable strain on them financially, socially and temporally, leading to depletion harms. Moana noted how “petrol was pretty big [expense] because I was coming back every weekend, because I’ve got whānau here ... I’ve got grandparents, and I’ve got sisters here that I’ve got responsibilities for.” She also stated how she has little time for self-care during placements: “Sleep, family, friends, engagement in sport. Everything kind of just goes by the wayside.”

Aroha is a single mum to a teenage daughter, which comes with its own challenges and pressures. She noted that she’s the “only one in my cohort that has a child, and I’m the only one that doesn’t have a partner ... the others have ... someone else that can support them, like financially”. Aroha also noted how the scholarships available were designed for the normative full-time “traditional student” (Rudick & Dannels, 2020), not for those with caring responsibilities who might have to study part-time. Because of this temporal **pressure**, Aroha had to put her daughter into boarding school for a period of time, which disrupted the closeness of their relationship and contributed to her daughter being diagnosed with “severe depression”. This then affected her relationship with her grandmother, who “couldn’t understand” why she was “studying postgraduate” and putting her daughter into boarding school. As she described it, “The whole situation ended up being very, very ugly.” Aroha was stretched in two directions—lacking both financial or emotional support from parents or a partner, while being responsible for the care and wellbeing of a child. The temporal pressures associated with a professional PhD had a depleting effect on both her and her daughter, the latter of whom suffered from depression, while her relationships with her grandmother and wider whānau also suffered.

These kinds of pressures and difficult personal decisions, leading to **depletion** harms, were also shared by the six international PhDs we spoke to, both in their interviews and during a focus group we ran to dig more deeply into their specific challenges. Many had substantial pressure to care for families they had left behind in their home countries, both in affective and financial terms (they often had incurred a debt to their parents or other family or friends that would have to be repaid in the future).

At the same time, through moving to New Zealand, they had become isolated from their family and community support networks in their home nations, a vital source of care. Kulap, a South East Asian PhD student based in Te Papa-i-Oea Palmerston North, hadn't seen her family in person for more than four years, due to COVID restrictions on travel and financial constraints. Furthermore, she only saw her partner around once a month, because he was located in a different New Zealand city. Living apart from partners was a common experience for the international PhDs, as they were often also PhD students who had selected their university strategically. For Kulap, seeing her partner also involved a financial calculation: she worked as a part-time delivery driver, and weekends were the peak times for this kind of work. Other students were separated from partners due to them holding a professional job in their home country. While Jamal's (male South Asian) partner would have qualified to come with him on a Partner of a Student Work Visa, "she has to quit her job, which is a bit difficult decision".

Alienation/isolation are exacerbated by **extractive** working conditions. Being away from her friends was a challenge for Vanshika, a female South Asian student, who said she was a "social person" with "a lot of friends" in her home country of Sri Lanka. In her first "4 to 5 months I was alone, working and working", before she was able to build up new friend networks in New Zealand. The "working and working" segment is itself revealing. We argue that the isolation experienced by many of the international PhD students was linked to an unofficial culture of overwork; a means of extraction which limited their ability to forge new networks and even find time for self-care. Vanishka, when asked about how many hours a week she typically spent on her PhD, stated that: "I normally work more than 60 hours a week." While the official guidance is "8 hours a day [...], I'm working more than that time", leaving "only a few hours a day as a free time", including weekends. While some PhD supervisors talked to the students about work-life balance and the need to maintain time for socialising and self-care, it seems that this wasn't strictly monitored or enforced. Many students didn't see their supervisors regularly, and when they did, it would mostly be to check that work was being completed on time and to schedule.

Broader structural issues also made securing work-life balance almost impossible for the international PhD students. While full-time students nominally have up to four years to complete their doctorate, scholarships are only three years long, adding considerable pressure to finish within that time. This can create stress when unexpected contingencies occur, which is likely to happen in complex PhD studies. Jamal noted that it's "quite difficult to finish in three years", while Fareed, a South Asian male student, stated that: "I can't like stay beyond my three years... there won't be any money to support me." Further adding to the **pressure**, students in the writing-up stage are attempting to write in academic English, a language that is not their first. Fareed admitted that he's "always stressed out about writing because English is not my first language".

When discussing these pressures in the focus group for international PhD students, Kulap described how the need to make sacrifices is normalised both for international PhD students and in Global South cultures more broadly:

... people don't feel like they could be present with their family or friends, or like being ... social, and because they have to work, they have to study ... from what I've seen growing up, it's kind of normal that you have to make those little sacrifices. To make it through for future ... I don't know. Coming from a third world [country], it's always the future that you have to work on rather than the present.

This extract reveals something about the imbrication of international PhD students within **extractive** networks of global capitalism which exploit and extract their labour (Maury, 2020). While sold a myth of launching a successful international academic career in New Zealand, where hard work will be rewarded with success in the future, the reality is that much of Aotearoa's scientific research is outsourced to low-paid workers from the Global South, who are put under considerable pressure to work long hours, putting their connections with family, friends and partners on hold. Kulap continued by evoking a balancing metaphor to allude to the depletion harms and mental health toll this can take, despite rationalising it through the discourse of entrepreneurialism and personal choice: "It's kind of OK because you just have to choose the balance that you want. Of course the balance is never gonna be balanced. Something is gonna tip."

Discussion and conclusion

Through drawing on the experiences of Massey University students, this article argues that the zombie university system (institutions that no longer function for the public good, but for private, extractive profit) has a knock-on zombification effect on students. This was evident in the narratives of students who attend classes in body but are too exhausted and depleted to engage. The massive cuts to administrative, wellbeing and teaching programmes at Massey University during 2023 (the year our data were collected) signalled an uncaring attitude from the leadership, particularly when combined with an authoritarian orientation that appeared to not listen to student concerns and which poorly communicated their implications. The uncertainty of whether the survey participants may be required to move cities, be separated from partners, or be deprived of the collective experience of in-person learning, combined with and compounded other stressors, such as work-study balance, health concerns, financial troubles and the need to care for dependents, adding to a sense of exhaustion and emotional depletion.

Through these five themes of pressures, frustration, alienation/isolation, depletion, and extraction, we explored how students' capacities for care (for self and others) were tested and depleted while at university. The institutional context exacerbated each of these five themes; that is, the situation was made worse by Massey SLT's programme of cuts and digitalisation. This is revelatory of a much broader institutional dynamic whereby systemic underfunding of the university system leads to individual universities implementing programmes that are ultimately extractive and depletive.

Similarly, the international PhD students we interviewed, while nominally studying for prestigious qualifications and future careers in research and academia, were also exploited by a broader colonial extractive system. Uda (2021, 2023) has argued that international research students are drawn to the Global North higher education system through a "coloniality of power", which continues to marginalise their own universities and knowledge systems (a hierarchy that is sedimented through global rankings). Once in the Global North, international research students are Othered, classed as inferior, and often "feel marginalised, unsupported, dominated and subjugated" (Uda, 2023, p. 67). Fraser (2023) reminds us that capitalism has always deployed racial distinctions in order to maximise extractive profits, with racialised populations subjected to more precarious working conditions and lower pay than White workers in the Global North. Postgraduate students are already the "cheap labour" of universities (Bhatnagar, 2022), and international students, with their isolation from friends and family, willingness to work long hours, and precarious visa status, even more so.

We can see these dynamics at play in the narratives of the international PhD students. Many of them worked very long hours, including evenings and weekends, for scholarship stipends that are far lower than the national minimum wage (Soar et al., 2022). At the same time, those stipends last for only three years, which is barely enough time to complete a complex PhD in a foreign language, adding depleting pressures and stresses. We saw through Kulap's balancing metaphor extract that these pressures and stresses

are normalised as necessary sacrifices for future success. However, there is only so much balancing they can do: “Something is gonna tip.”

We end then by considering the long-term effects of this kind of depletion, not only at the individual level but also at the societal level. We argue that the zombie university system not only disrupts democratic reproduction, through depleting critical thinking abilities and impeding the free exchange of ideas, but also social reproduction—our ability to “maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fisher and Tronto, cited in Rai, 2024, p. 7). Social reproduction relies on subjects who have empathy for and care for others, as well as the time and energy to care for themselves and their communities (beyond maintaining productivity). The above analysis has illustrated that students are deprived of that time and energy by an extractive zombie system set within a context of progressive cuts to student support and the broader higher education system. This has knock-on effects for civic life, whereby students gain experience primarily in functioning-despite-depletion rather than having the time and space to develop the skills needed for care in the political sense, such as deliberation or critical empathy.

As such, we want to theorise the zombification of the university system as jeopardising not only democracy (through the demise of critical thinking and the closing down of idea exchange) but also society, through its depletion of our ability to care for ourselves and others. Of course, these should not be viewed as distinct, but interwoven. As Fraser (2023) puts it, depletion saps “energies needed to tend to families, maintain households, sustain communities, nourish friendships, build political networks, and forge solidarities” (p. 62). In other words, care and social reproduction are fundamental human activities that allow families, communities, societies, political organisations and universities to function. The cost of depletion is therefore existential for all of us, but particularly for the young and future generations (Rai, 2024). More research is needed on the relationship between the zombie university and social reproduction, both at the individual and societal levels.

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