The entrepreneurialized university as a performance of neoliberalization

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I compare two pathways of reform in Simon Fraser University (SFU), both of which seek to bring increased input from private corporate interests into the formation of educational priorities. My sources of information are government and university documents, and interviews I conducted in late 2015 with senior SFU officials. The first path is a government-mandated “re-engineering” of education oriented to training students for jobs deemed “in-demand” by industry representatives. This project seems to have elicited only cynical compliance from SFU administrators. The second path is the formation of direct industry-university partnerships through industry-led accreditation agencies. I argue that the actions of both the government and SFU are understandable as efforts to demonstrate their commitment to neoliberal reform. I also argue that, in a context of normalized neoliberalism, direct and voluntary industry-university partnerships may be more acceptable to competitively-oriented administrators than state coercion in delivering corporate influence into universities.

**Introduction**

In 2014, the Premier of British Columbia (BC) announced a plan to “re-engineer” the province’s education system, from kindergarten to post-secondary, in order to make it more responsive to industry “needs” (Province of BC, 2014). According to the provincial government, substantial educational reform is necessary in order to facilitate economic growth, especially through the development of liquefied natural gas (LNG), which will attract investors only if they are satisfied an adequately trained labour force will be available to build the necessary infrastructure. This plan, the “Skills for Jobs Blueprint”, states that decisions about education funding and priorities are henceforth to be made in consultation with “employers” and “industry partners”. LNG proponents, whose investments could “contribute up to a trillion dollars to the province’s GDP” (Province of BC, 2014, p. 2), have a privileged position in these consultations and the plan itself was formulated based on their input. Among the specific reforms detailed is the restructuring of university funding so that an increasing portion of provincial operating grants are allocated towards training for “high-demand occupations” (Province of BC, 2014, p. 13).

Simon Fraser University (SFU), its main campus in the suburbs of Vancouver, BC, is one of the universities targeted for educational “re-engineering”. Despite the dramatic language of the policy, interviews with members of SFU’s upper administration indicate that the university has been largely unaffected by the reforms. SFU’s administration were able to frame existing programs and previously planned changes as products of provincial policy. While many students and faculty object to corporations influencing university education, this does not seem to be the reason the upper administration has only cynically complied with the province’s plan. In fact, SFU is preparing to formally declare one of its programs is in alignment with the labour needs of industry by accrediting it through ECO Canada, an organization controlled by corporate interests whose stated aims are remarkably similar to those of the Jobs Blueprint—to ensure education is “responsive to industry demand” (ECO Canada, 2015a).

Why do SFU administrators resist a government-mandated relationship with resource extraction corporations, yet actively seek to form their own partnerships with industry? Why is the provincial government promulgating this dramatic reform project to make universities more “responsive” to industry needs when universities are doing this on their own? In addressing these questions, I hope to unpack some of the processes through which corporations influence higher education. These processes occur in a broad context of neoliberalization, what Peck (2010, p. 1) calls the “open-ended and contradictory process of politically assisted market rule”. Since the 1970s, the roll-back of state funding and the roll-out of new forms of regulation has profoundly altered university priorities, forcing universities to focus on competing for student enrolment and new sources of funding (Ball, 2003, 2012). Universities around the world have formed increasingly close ties with corporations, seeking revenue through donations, sponsorships, and partnerships (Hirtt, 2001; Larner and Heron, 2005; Ball, 2012). University research is now often performed in partnership with private corporations for the explicit purpose of facilitating private profit (Demeritt, 2000; Brown, 2015).

In this paper, I examine corporate influence on university education, focusing on why universities develop curricula and programs in partnership with industry. The case study of SFU provides insight into how direct industry-university partnerships align with neoliberal norms of governance, in which consensus-driven decision-making by “stakeholders” replaces the central state as the “ideal-typical configuration of authority” (Shamir, 2008, p. 3). These partnerships also provide universities with labour market knowledge, seen to be uniquely possessed by corporations, which informs development of the job-relevant curricula thought to be attractive to students. Finally, partnerships demonstrate the university’s entrepreneurial orientation and, when forced on universities by the state, demonstrate government commitment to neoliberal reform.

I investigated these issues through the analysis of policy documents, examination of the public statements of government and university representatives, and through interviews with students, faculty, and administrators at SFU. Understanding the perspectives of a range of actors provided important context; however, interviews with the university’s upper administration form the bulk of the empirical material employed in this study, as these were the most useful for understanding how SFU interacts with provincial demands and why the university itself initiates closer relationships with industry. While the highest governing bodies within SFU, at least formally, are the Board of Governors and Senate, by most accounts the administration holds considerable power to shape university priorities.[[1]](#footnote-1) The complex forms of power and lines of fracture and contestation internal to a university certainly deserve investigation. In this study, however, I bracket these concerns to focus on overall institutional practices and orientation of the university as demonstrated in official policy and the statements of those in positions of power.

In what follows, I first draw on theories of neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism to understand how recurrent reform in the interests of competitive positioning has become a normative practice of state institutions. I then turn to the neoliberalization and entrepreneurialization of universities, drawing especially on the concept of performativity to describe the regime of surveillance that governs universities and structures the subjectivities of institutional actors. Next, I describe SFU’s articulation with two surveillance regimes that seek to ensure SFU is meeting the labour needs of industry: the Skills for Jobs Blueprint, which requires the university to adhere to state-formulated targets for program delivery; and private accreditation, which facilitates the university’s voluntary adherence to industry-formulated curriculum standards. I then consider how university administrators respond to these two modes of institutional change. I argue that, in a context of normalized neoliberalism, direct and voluntary industry-university partnerships may be more acceptable to competitively-oriented administrators than state coercion in delivering corporate influence into universities. I also argue that the actions of the provincial government and SFU are understandable as efforts to demonstrate their commitment to neoliberal reform.

**Neoliberalism and the drive to marketized reform**

 Scholars have employed the term neoliberalism to describe a variety of global political-economic and social changes since the 1970s. The ubiquity of the concept within the critical social sciences has led some to question whether neoliberalism is in “danger of becoming a detached signifier” (Ball, 2012, p. 18). In this paper, I draw on theories of neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism to analyse the structural constraints and taken-for-granted logic with which individuals, institutions, and governments conduct themselves and interact with processes of institutional change.

Harvey’s (2005) analysis of neoliberalism is perhaps the most straightforward, describing it as a project to restore the economic power of the upper classes. He describes the reaction by economic elites to falling rates of profit in the 1970s: an ideological campaign to delegitimize the Keynesian welfare state, dismantle social programs, and deregulate capital, especially finance capital. The policies of the Reagan and Thatcher governments in the US and UK exemplify these efforts (Harvey, 2005). Harvey argues that the architects of neoliberalism attached their political economic program to the ideal of individual freedom, which they held to be threatened by state intervention and could only be realized through market freedoms.

Other authors have focused on the complex processes of constructing neoliberal ideology and projects of neoliberalization. Peck (2010) insists that neoliberalism never exists in a complete and coherent form. It is a “permanent revolution” (Peck, 2010, p. 7). Similarly, Brenner and Theodore (2002) argue that “actually existing neoliberalism” is an always-ongoing process that coexists with other, sometimes contradictory, social forms and political tendencies. Moreover, processes of neoliberalization are spatially uneven and path-dependent as they are inevitably embedded in “inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, p. 349). Neoliberalization involves both the “roll-back” of Keynesian welfare-state institutions and regulatory regimes as well as the “roll-out” of new forms of socioeconomic regulation that extend market discipline and market logic (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Particularly relevant for my study are analyses of the roll-out of governance through public-private partnerships (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), a form of regulation that both the Jobs Blueprint and ECO Canada seek to deliver into SFU.

 Analyses of neoliberalism from a Foucauldian perspective emphasize its constitutive power in forming new subjectivities. Wendy Brown (2015) provides an account of neoliberalism as a “normative form of reason” (p. 114) that structures identities, societies, and the state, and the relationships between them, such that “all life is configured through the economic” (p. 10). Drawing directly on Foucault, Brown argues that the market has become *the* site of truth, or “veridiction”, by which all aspects of social life are measured and governed (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 1979/2010). Market logic is so dominant and pervasive that “those who act according to other principles are not simply irrational, but refuse ‘reality’” (Brown, 2015, p. 67). Neoliberalism has also redefined the ideal actors who constitute these markets. Rather than the classical liberal figure of *homo economicus,* who is a creature of interest-driven utility maximization, the neoliberal *homo economicus* is human capital, striving to maximize the value of an enterprise (Foucault, 1979/2010) or, in an era of financialization, a “portfolio of investments” (Brown, 2015, p. 70). Competing human capitals, like all capitals, must constantly work to maintain and increase the value of their capital (Brown, 2015). This requirement to self-invest has been made more pressing by conditions of austerity and other governmental policies that respond to the exigencies of international competition by selectively investing or disinvesting in individuals “depending on their potential for GDP enhancement” (Brown, 2015, p. 110). The result is “responsibilized” individuals who are obligated to “engage in a particular form of self-sustenance that meshes with the morality of the state and the health of the economy” (Brown, 2015, p. 84). State institutions, including public universities, are subjected to a similar governing logic as state investment may depend on the university’s contribution to economic competitiveness.

The responsibilization of individuals and institutions has also occurred through new modes of power, most notably the increasing dominance of “governance”. Though the term is used in many different ways, governance generally describes a move away from bureaucratic, top-down modes of state control to a form of organization involving horizontal partnerships among “stakeholders” that emphasises consensus-building and problem-solving (Walters, 2004). Unlike neoliberalism, governance is not only a critics’ term. It is used by corporations, non-profits, and governments to describe intra-organizational authority and decision-making. In addition, since the early 1990s, governance theorists have promoted the democratizing potential of increased local control and broad participation in decision making (Walters, 2004; Brown, 2015). Critical scholars, however, have argued that the devolution of responsibility to local scales, combined with austerity and fierce inter-jurisdictional competition, has contributed to responsibilization in that it assigns the burden of addressing the social dislocations of neoliberalization to people and institutions with vastly insufficient resources and power to affect the structural drivers of these dynamics (Shamir, 2008; Brown, 2015).

According to Shamir (2008, p. 3), the establishment of governance as the new “ideal-typical configuration of authority” results from a systematic discrediting of bureaucratic governments and privileging of the market as a model for all social endeavours. The result is a re-conceptualization of the state so that it no longer holds a privileged position of rule but operates within a “market of authorities” in partnership with, and competing amongst, private sources of authority (Shamir, 2008, p. 3). In the case of universities, one example of this move towards governance is the increasing prevalence of university accreditation by quasi-state and (competing) non-state agencies.

Governance has also meant a blurring of the boundaries between “public” and “private” interests (Walters, 2004). As Brown (2015) argues, the broad usage of the term governance indicates a convergence of the norms and practices of the state and business. The roll-out of governance structures, with an emphasis on “partnership”, has also been a key part of incorporating specific private business interests into the administration of formerly public institutions. Forms of public-private governance like business improvement districts have proliferated globally (Ward, 2006). Partnerships have become increasingly complex and involve the creation of new “hybrid” forms where the lines between the state and private interests is impossible to discern (Ball, 2012). Brophy and Tucker-Abramson (2012, p. 25) describe a trend towards “increasingly inventive and insidious public-private partnerships in sectors like healthcare and education”. A major goal of many of these novel governance forms is to entrepreneurialize government, that is, to reform the state in the image of business (Linder, 1999).

The turn to entrepreneurialism in local governance has been well-documented. In a seminal paper, Harvey (1989) describes how declining investment from central states combined with increasingly mobile capital has created an imperative for local governments to compete for investment in an attempt to secure stable economic growth. Such competition often takes the form of speculative infrastructure projects pursued through public-private partnerships, regulatory restructuring, and tax reforms that incentivize and subsidize companies to locate within a jurisdiction (Harvey, 1989). Any competitive advantage gained by such projects is usually brief, however, as other jurisdictions attempt to mimic successful reforms. Thus, localities are caught in a “competitive treadmill” (Thrift, 2002) that requires a continuous flow of new investments and restructuring projects in order to gain ultimately fleeting advantages (Harvey, 1989). These attempts at attracting investment further facilitate capital mobility, as jurisdictions, in effect, subsidize capital flight. Peck (2002) argues this state of affairs has produced a regime of “fast policy”, in which constant “scanning” of the policy environment for new “best-practices” and policy fads has become a normative standard of governance. Policies themselves are also enrolled in inter-jurisdictional competition, as locally “successful” policies are seen to increase the stature and visibility of cities and regions (McCann, 2013). Policy development is often “extrospective”, that is, formulated for a non-local audience for the purpose of improving competitive positioning.

Clearly, an orientation to the market has become a normative standard for many governments, institutions, and individuals. More than any particular end-state, what is valued seems to be change itself, the constant search for new organizational forms that enhance capital value. The next section briefly outlines some ways in which these dynamics—neoliberalism, governance, and entrepreneurialism—work on and in universities to produce institutional change and create conditions in which corporate interests can impact higher education.

**The neoliberalization and entrepreneurialization of universities**

 Many authors have argued that the relationship between the state and public universities has undergone a pronounced shift beginning in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Cowen, 1996; Hirtt, 2001; Ball, 2003, 2012; Larner and Heron, 2005; Shore, 2008). Consistent with the increasing dominance of a neoliberal and entrepreneurial orientation, states have rolled-back financial support for universities and rolled-out reform projects aimed at re-orienting them towards better facilitating economic growth and competitive positioning. Though there are important local variations, this disinvestment from and restructuring of universities is a global phenomenon (Lye, Newfield, & Vernon, 2011). Here, I first consider how restructuring programs involving increased state surveillance and assessment have affected universities, and then examine how universities, under conditions of austerity, have themselves become increasingly entrepreneurial.

 State restructuring programs have generally been accompanied by a broad critique of university systems, including the notion that higher education is insufficiently “relevant” to the employment needs of students, the labour needs of business, and the overall competitive economic concerns of nation states (Cowen, 1996). For example, Hirtt (2001) describes how business lobby groups in Europe in the late 1980s worked to stigmatise a European education tradition that, in the words of one report, “allows and even encourages its young individuals to take the liberty of pursuing ‘interesting’, not directly job-related, studies” (European Round Table quoted in Hirtt, 2001, p. 4). Since the late 1970s, universities have also been subject to the now-standard neoliberal critiques of the public sector as unaccountable, inefficient, and anti-innovation (Shore, 2008). One commonly proposed solution to this perceived crisis in higher education has been to foster increased input from “industry” in university program offerings and curricula. In the 1990s, the European Commission (1996, p. 31) took up the cause of forming stronger relationships with industry in a major report on education, proposing “a legal and operational framework at the European level that facilitates the development of partnerships between schools, companies and local authorities”.

Beyond merely “facilitating” partnerships, many states subjected universities to new supervisory procedures designed to enforce a close connection between higher education and industry and otherwise ensure universities support national competitive priorities (Cowen, 1996). For example, Larner and Heron (2005) describe how research funding bodies in New Zealand have pushed universities into partnerships with industry by rating researchers on the strength of their relationships with the “end-users” of research. Similarly, Shore (2008, p. 289) discusses new “audit technologies”, which, along with government cut-backs, have “revolutionized the way British universities define themselves: they are transnational financial corporations, the emphasis being on generating income through commercialized research, on training rather than education, and on providing students (now called ‘customers’ and ‘users’) with marketable rather than critical skills”. Shore (2008, p. 278) describes the resulting “audit culture” in which the roll-out of state supervision and the demand for individual and institutional adherence to quantitative output targets has interpellated university employees as “auditees” whose activities are oriented to making themselves measurable.

Ball (2003) employs the concept of performativity to describe this regime of university surveillance and assessment and its effect on people within universities. Though the term has been used in a variety of ways, Ball (2003, p. 216) draws on the sociologist Jean-Francois Lyotard to describe performativity as “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change… The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection.” In effect, for Ball (2003), performativity is a disciplinary apparatus that demands certain performances from those subject to its power. Such an apparatus has deeply affected British universities. Benchmarks, targets, and quantitative assessments of individual and institutional “performance” means administrators and faculty have become increasingly focused on, and skilled in delivering, reports (Ball, 2012). This regime of performativity impels individuals and institutions to engage in “fabrications” or the “cynical compliance inherent in making up responses to performativity” (Ball, 2003, p. 224).

The possibility for university administrators to feign compliance, to “game” measurements, and otherwise subvert supervisory procedures means that the efficacy of restructuring projects depends, in part, on how institutional actors perceive reforms. As Clarke and Newman (1997, p. xiii) argue in their discussion of market-oriented reform in British institutions during the 1980s, “the success of any change project, whether initiated by government legislation or by organisational managers, depends on the success of its claims for legitimacy and its ability to win the 'hearts and minds' of those on whom it impacts”. Though neoliberal restructuring programs can also be coercive, many neoliberal reforms, consistent with the norms of devolved governance, “act on and through the agency, interests, desires and motivations of individuals, encouraging them to see themselves as active subjects responsible for improving their own conduct” (Shore, 2008, p. 284). Thus, understanding how regimes of performativity impact universities requires understanding the priorities and subjectivities of institutional actors.

These priorities have been deeply affected by the decline in state funding for universities. In the United States, for example, government appropriations accounted for 39% of public university revenue and student fees 32% in 2002, but a decade later government appropriations accounted for only 22% of revenue and student fees 48% (Moody’s, 2011). This radical shift has meant universities must compete for student enrolment in order to maintain adequate revenue, while also seeking new sources of funding. Brown (2015) outlines some of the many corporate partnerships established by universities, including sponsorship of programs, buildings, research chairs, and schools. Some of these arrangements explicitly give corporations input into hiring decisions and curricula (Brown, 2015). In addition to selling naming rights and decision-making power, many British universities have partnered with private corporations to export educational services and generate revenue internationally (Ball, 2012). These entrepreneurial activities require universities to conform to the expectations of market participants, leading Cowen (1996, p. 251) to argue that, in addition to state-mandated targets and benchmarks, the market is a “strategy for the construction of performativity”. State disinvestment increases competition between universities and reliance on privately-generated funding, thus engendering a “double surveillance” (Cowen, 1996, p. 251), in which universities must perform their compliance with state targets and conform to the demands of corporate partners.

Universities’ position under conditions of austerity and neoliberalism is similar in many ways to that of the states that supervise and (de)fund them. Both have become entrepreneurial, seekers of investment capital, and their success in this regard is determined by how they are perceived by important market participants. Governments and universities, therefore, must *perform* their commitment to the practices and norms valued by the market, norms and values that can be summed up by the term neoliberalism. The requirement to perform neoliberalization can provide insight into reform projects initiated by states that target universities and reforms pursued by universities themselves. Both may be initiated, accepted, or resisted based on their contribution to the performance of neoliberalization.

**Surveillance and government-led reform at SFU**

 SFU opened in 1965. It is BC’s second-largest university, with a student body of around 35,000 (SFU, 2015a). It is publicly funded, though provincial grants have been decreasing steadily for a number of years. As of the 2015/16 fiscal year, student tuition and fees have become the primary source of university revenue (SFU, 2015b). SFU’s “Strategic Vision” is “To be the leading engaged university” (Petter, n.d.). While these words may seem no more than a trite marketing slogan, they quite accurately describe two major foci of the university: competitive positioning and the formation of partnerships, including significant connections between corporations and the university. For example, SFU has engaged in a partnership with an Australian company to create Fraser International College (FIC), a for-profit institution operating on SFU’s campus that pays SFU 30% of its gross revenue in return for the use of SFU’s brand and curricula and a guarantee of preferred enrolment in SFU for FIC’s students, all of whom are international (Brophy and Tucker-Abramson, 2012). In addition to direct revenues, then, FIC provides SFU with a leg up on the competition in attracting these high fee-paying international students, an increasingly important university funding source (Brophy and Tucker-Abramson, 2012; SFU, 2014).

BC’s provincial government, despite decreasing financial support, still exerts considerable pressure on the university to align with its own competitive priorities. The 2015/2016 “Mandate Letter” from the provincial government to SFU demands it implement the Skills for Jobs Blueprint as the first “strategic priority action” (Wilkinson, 2015). As mentioned at the outset, the goal of the Jobs Blueprint is to “match training and education with industry needs” (Province of BC, 2014, p. 7). According to the provincial government, this is necessary in order to “deliver the skilled workforce B.C.’s growing LNG and other sectors need, and create the opportunity for long-term, well-paying jobs that strengthen our families and communities” (Province of BC, 2014, p. 3). As part of this plan, universities are required to allocate an increasing proportion of provincial funding, from 12% in 2015-16 to 25% in 2017-18, towards training students for jobs that are “in-demand” in the labour market. To realize the plan, the province has constituted a “Labour Market Priorities Board” composed of government and industry representatives to receive labour market data, determine which jobs are “in-demand”, and decide whether universities are adequately meeting targets for funding allocation. The Jobs Blueprint states that funding will be “re-directed if programs do not meet measurable outcomes” (Province of BC, 2014).

While SFU is increasingly subject to such “audit technologies” or “regimes of performativity”, their effectiveness in eliciting anything more than cynical compliance from administrators seems to depend on how well these align with, or effectively shape, the priorities of university actors. Though the plan purports to radically reorient higher education, interviews with SFU administrators indicate that the Jobs Blueprint is having a negligible effect on the university. SFU is able to frame existing programs and courses as meeting the targets set by the Labour Market Priorities Board. Many administrators stated that the Jobs Blueprint is not impacting the university because SFU is already responsive to the job market, and already provides education valued by employers, irrespective of provincial policies.

A number of interviewees made reference to graduate employment statistics to demonstrate that SFU was successful in this regard. As one senior administrator put it, “We can just go through our existing programs and, because so many of the programs that we have at SFU are going to graduate students who are likely to move into one of those high-demand job categories, it’s actually not too difficult for us to demonstrate that we’re doing what we said we were doing [in terms of meeting targets]”. Some interviewees stated that student demand for job-relevant education had already pushed SFU towards a greater focus on job-relevant offerings. For example, in the words of one administrator:

we recognize that almost 50%, or pretty much 50%, of the student population is coming into the Faculty of Environment and into SFU because of career, and if they are coming in to look for a solid career - I don’t think this is a new idea that the university is going to be responding to these kind of student requests, student demands. The Faculty of Environment doesn’t need to make significant changes specifically. And if it did, it would be kind of worrisome to think that we actually were not thinking about job skills as part of the training.

The Jobs Blueprint, therefore, is seen by administrators as unnecessary, burdensome in its reporting requirements, but not particularly threatening. Administrators interviewed for this study seemed to accept the Jobs Blueprint’s central argument—that education in general, and universities in particular, should be oriented towards employment training. Moreover, administrators seemed to agree with the policy’s expectation that universities should consult with industry in order to understand the skills valued by employers. Indeed, SFU has already established considerable links with corporate interests that influence curricula development and program delivery.

Multiple interviewees stated that adjunct faculty drawn from private enterprise provide advice and guidance to SFU departments and keep them up to date on new developments in specific fields. As well, the relationships formed between SFU and businesses through “co-op” programs, in which the university places students in temporary jobs for a semester, were cited as providing useful feedback on SFU programs and curricula. A senior administrator in the Faculty of Environment at SFU also reported on a new initiative to form an “external advisory board of non-academics… so that I’m sure what we are doing internally in the Faculty is meeting changing demands of business, industry, and government”. This administrator also described a pending arrangement that will further facilitate industry input into university education—the accreditation of SFU’s environmental science program through Environmental Careers Organization (ECO) Canada.

**Accreditation as a technology of market surveillance**

Accreditation is now a ubiquitous term in higher education. Its global proliferation reflects the increasing dominance of neoliberal governance models in public institutions. In western Europe, a range of national higher education systems, from the relative independence universities enjoyed in the UK to Germany’s state-centralised institutional control, converged in form during the 1980s and 1990s, with most countries requiring universities to become accredited through newly-created quasi-NGOs as a condition of state funding (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). In the USA, accreditation was initiated by independent regional associations of universities in the early 20th century (Harcelroad & Eaton, 2011). These associations were given a regulatory role by the 1965 Higher Education Act, which restricted federal funding and federal student loan distribution to accredited institutions (Office of the Legislative Counsel, 1965/2014). Accreditation systems run by public-private governance structures were also imposed coercively by institutional agents of neoliberalization. In 1994, a major World Bank policy paper called for “external accreditation” regimes for universities (World Bank, 1994, p. 69), and subsequent structural adjustment programs included provisions for the establishment of arm's-length accreditation agencies (Mollis & Marginson 2002). Thus, through a variety of pathways, university accreditation by state-approved, but not state-controlled, agencies has become a globally common method of regulating higher education institutions.

Institutional accreditation has arisen alongside the accreditation of specific programs by state-approved professional associations, which facilitate graduates’ certification in regulated professions (Harcelroad & Eaton, 2011). In addition, universities increasingly pursue “private accreditation”, offered by various independent agencies with no state mandate, as a means of bolstering reputation and market positioning (Hamalainen et al., 2001). This has become particularly widespread in business schools, but is moving into other disciplines. There are hundreds of private accreditation agencies operating in the US alone, many of which compete, in what could be seen as a “market of authorities” (Shamir, 2008, p. 3), to accredit programs and institutions. Indeed, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation offers a kind of meta-accreditation service that “recognizes” 60 accrediting organizations and warns against the proliferation of “accreditation mills” (CHEA, 2015). As I discuss below, institutional and program accreditation has become a common means for the surveillance of universities by the market and a means by which they can perform their adherence to market norms.

Accreditation is currently a major pre-occupation for SFU administrators. Canada is unique among Western countries in having no state-recognized, institutional-level university accreditation system. Nevertheless, SFU is voluntarily pursuing institutional accreditation through the US-based Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), one of the six regional associations that accredit most American universities. SFU is the first Canadian research university to seek such accreditation. Becoming accredited through NWCCU is a seven-year process, requiring multiple self-evaluations, site visits by evaluation committees, and the creation of explicit “learning outcomes” for every course and program of study in the university (NWCCU, n.d.). According to SFU administration, these efforts are justified because accreditation “will give SFU a distinct competitive advantage nationally and globally” (SFU, 2014). Furthermore, accreditation will provide a “broadly recognized set of best-practice standards” and “help establish clearer benchmarks/standards for assessing learning outcomes” (SFU, 2014). Institutional accreditation is also a requirement to compete in the US-based National Collegiate Athletics Association, which is seen as a means to “build the profile of SFU throughout North America” (President Andrew Petter quoted in SFU, 2012).

In addition to the ongoing process of institutional-level accreditation, seventeen different agencies provide degree-specific accreditations of SFU programs (SFU, 2014). Many are private, including all five agencies that accredit SFU’s business school. One of these, the Business Technology Management Accreditation Council, is unambiguous about its purpose of ensuring that industry is supplied with a properly trained labour force. Its aim is “producing graduates who have the capability profile that has become the new norm for employers” and its standards were “developed in partnership with… 30+ major employers” (CIPS, 2015).

This logic of accreditation, explicitly designed to ensure university programs serve industry needs, seems to be seeping out of SFU’s business school and into its environmental science program. ECO Canada, according to its website, trains and certifies “environmental professionals” and provides post-secondary environmental program accreditation (ECO Canada, 2015a). ECO Canada’s former president explained the organization’s purpose to a Canadian parliamentary committee as follows: “We are an industry-initiated, industry-led, not-for-profit Canadian corporation with a mandate to ensure an adequate supply of people with the appropriate skills and knowledge to meet the environmental human resource needs of the public and private sectors” (Trump, 2012). The organization receives federal funding through a program to develop “partnership-based projects that… address skills shortages in strategic sectors of Canada’s economy”, the same program that funds the above-mentioned Business Technology Management Accreditation Council (ESDC, 2015; ITAC, 2015). ECO Canada’s six board members include two corporate consultants and representatives of Pacific Future Energy Corporation (the proponent of a new oil refinery on BC’s northwest coast) and TransCanada Corporation (ECO Canada, 2015b), a pipeline company involved in proposed LNG projects in BC (TransCanada, 2015).

ECO Canada’s website lists 20 accredited post-secondary environmental programs across Canada. The organization claims accreditation “raises your profile as an elite, nationally-recognized program” and “combines the best of academic freedom and an awareness of environmental industry needs” (ECO Canada, 2015c). Accredited environmental programs must demonstrate that graduates are able to perform a list of 35 “Environmental Competency Outcomes” (ECO Canada, 2011). In addition to skills such as the “Ability to Conduct Environmental Risk Assessments” and the “Ability to Analyze and Interpret Environmental Samples and Data”, a graduate is expected to “Display his/her understanding of the importance of commercializing environmental technologies, systems, and equipment” (ECO Canada, 2011). Graduates from accredited programs are also expected to have the “Ability to Develop/Implement Environmental Communications and Awareness Programs”, which includes the capacity to “Follow the instructions of senior staff and voluntarily request instruction and assistance prior to disseminating expert information to any source” (ECO Canada, 2011).

SFU does not yet have an ECO Canada-accredited program, and it is unclear whether significant changes to curricula would be necessary to comply with ECO Canada’s standards. Unlike the Jobs Blueprint, an effort which at least has the pretence of reforming universities, accreditation is simply affirmative. ECO Canada declares that accredited universities conform to its standards, not that they have changed in order to do so. However, a Faculty of Environment administrator clearly saw the potential of accreditation to shape university education as one of its benefits. The purpose of seeking accreditation was "to try and make the transition from this ivory tower mentality to a mentality that says our pedagogy is not isolated from the world in which we find ourselves. It’s going to be relevant to it; it’s going to be informed by it”.

**Public-private governance, economic knowledge, and performativity**

Here, I turn to a comparative discussion of the Skills for Jobs Blueprint and ECO Canada accreditation in an effort to analyse why SFU administrators resist the imposition of corporate influence with the former, yet embrace it in the latter. I consider differences between these initiatives in terms of their creation of public-private governance structures, their production of economic knowledge, and how they interact with the entrepreneurial projects of universities and governments.

The Skills for Jobs Blueprint and ECO Canada accreditation both involve the extension of new public-private governance structures into higher education institutions. Both are the result of governmental initiatives to steer education towards meeting the “needs” of industry, and both invoke the language of partnership to describe industry-university engagement. However, the role of the state and the nature of the partnerships differ markedly between the initiatives, and these differences may affect the way these governance structures articulate with universities.

The Jobs Blueprint declares “Government is working with our partners in education and industry to make sure education and training programs are aligned with the demands of the labour market” (Province of BC, 2014). The document also makes clear, however, that the two sets of partners have differing roles and quite different amounts of power. Industry determines its needs, universities configure themselves to fulfill those needs, and government ensures they do so through the threat of funding cuts. There is no pretence universities have any say in the formulation of the plan, or even in whether they wish to become a “partner” to it, though universities are given “flexibility” in meeting targets. The ends are decided by government and industry; universities can only determine the means by which the ends are achieved.

This coercion does not sit well with university administrators who criticise the “top-down management style” and “autocratic” decision-making of the provincial government. For some interviewees, there is a sense that the province’s heavy-handedness indicates a lack of appreciation for SFU’s competence, as demonstrated by the university’s position in competitive rankings. As one administrator said, “First of all I don’t like being told how to program. I think we know pretty well how to do academic programming at a university, especially a university like SFU that’s ranked the number one comprehensive university across the country. It’s ranked that way for a reason”.

SFU administrators also expressed opposition to the burdensome reporting requirements of the Skills for Jobs Blueprint. Interviewees described it as a “make work project”, saying it adds to the already-extensive reporting requirements of provincial, federal, and municipal governments. Yet, as noted above, the university is voluntarily pursuing institutional-level accreditation via the NWCCU, which will require annual reporting on every aspect of university programming. Program-specific accreditations add still more layers of reporting to still more agencies. Decision-makers at SFU are clearly eager to report on and submit the university’s practices to assessment by certain (non-state) external agencies.

Accreditation through ECO Canada, as noted above, is not regulated or mandated by the state. Though enabled and encouraged by federal funding, this is a voluntary and direct partnership between industry and academia. A Faculty of Environment administrator argued that ECO Canada accreditation had the benefit of creating a strong relationship between industry and the university while not sacrificing the latter’s independence:

Are we going to change everything just by virtue of what industry says? No, but it sure is interesting to me to find out if graduates from a certain program are walking into jobs without certain skills. I would like to know what skills they are identifying that may be missing and that does inform us when we are starting to evaluate curriculum.

However, while the initial move to partner with ECO Canada may be voluntary, adhering to accreditation requirements could begin to alter the institution. Once enrolled in the accreditation process, universities become accountable to industry representatives who monitor the university’s compliance with curriculum standards and assess “financial resources”, “admissions”, “faculty complement”, and “research and scholarly activity” (ECO Canada, 2012). This voluntary abdication of autonomy affects much finer-scale institutional practices than the Skills for Jobs Blueprint. While the Jobs Blueprint seeks to direct institutional-scale funding towards certain programs (and thus away from others), it makes no attempt to influence the curricula delivered in these programs. Furthermore, even the initial act of submitting to accreditation may be only formally voluntary. The perceived necessity to maintain competitive positioning and provide job-relevant training drives universities to submit their programs and even the entire institution to accreditation processes that purport to offer such competitive advantages.

The governance structures of the Skills for Jobs Blueprint and ECO Canada both work to generate economic knowledge and to use this knowledge to guide individual and institutional action. Such guidance is purported to benefit both individuals, who will be well-positioned to secure employment or realize new opportunities, and society, as it will mitigate existing or impending “labour shortages” that could impede economic growth. This emphasis on economic knowledge, especially regarding supply and demand in the “labour market”, raises the questions of how these economic signifiers are constructed and what they accomplish. On the one hand, there is a technocratic and scientistic conceit to the generation of this economic knowledge, which involves the statistical analysis of empirically-derived, quantitative data and which positions knowledge of the “market” as something objective and apolitical, in no particular group’s interest. On the other hand, both the Skills for Jobs Blueprint and ECO Canada generate their market data in close consultation with representatives of large resource extraction corporations. In this generation of market knowledge, the particular demands of corporate interests are indistinguishable from the generalized demand of “the market”.

Furthermore, both the Skills for Jobs Blueprint and ECO Canada tout their industry connections as legitimating the economic knowledge they produce, which is framed as “industry-validated” (Province of BC, 2014, p. 6) or “responsive to industry” (ECO Canada, 2015c). In the logic of these programs, the market is clearly *the* site of “veridiction”, determining the truth by which individuals and society must organize themselves. This “market”, however, is understood to be knowable only by the agents of capital: “industry” must be called on to reveal the nature of the market.

This might help to explain the position of administrators who resent the Skills for Jobs Blueprint. Opposition is not based in a concern over labour market knowledge driving decisions at the university, but a concern over who can legitimately produce that knowledge. Many administrators spoke scornfully of the provincial government’s ability to predict economic trends and labour market developments. The Skills for Jobs Blueprint seems to anticipate this critique of government’s capacity to know the economy, repeatedly insisting on the major role of industry in producing labour market data. Yet, despite the references to “industry-validated” knowledge, the corporate partners remain firmly in the background in what is clearly a government-led project. ECO Canada, by contrast, is not tainted by government hubris. It claims to build a direct link between universities and the purveyors of economic truth.

The acceptance of industry-led (and rejection of state-led) governance and knowledge can also be explained by their differential contribution to a primary concern of contemporary universities—the entrepreneurial project of improving competitive positioning. Though the Skills for Jobs Blueprint has neither convinced administrators of the necessity of change, nor coerced them into altering funding priorities, SFU has publicly and repeatedly declared that the policy is effecting change. One of the university President’s official “Goals and Objectives” is to “Support continued implementation of BC’s Skills for Jobs Blueprint and the development of an associated strategy to ensure SFU meets its enrolment targets for programs that educate for high demand occupations [and] improves the quality of labour market data used in curriculum development and planning” (Petter, 2015). Similarly, SFU’s 2015/2016 budget declares that “No change in the government grant is expected as a result of the Skills for Jobs Blueprint program, as the University is *working towards*, and anticipates meeting the targets established by the Provincial government” (SFU, 2015b, emphasis added). One interviewee noted that the provincial government specifically asked SFU administrators to demonstrate that the Jobs Blueprint was impacting university priorities:

The ministry realized that every institution is going to meet this target. They could meet it right now… But that doesn’t go down very well with the government when they’re claiming that they’ve built a program that is going to re-engineer the post-secondary system to meet the needs of the private sector, the public sector, the worries of the Conference Board of Canada, the demands of the parents and so on. So they want to see some progress. So the ministry kind of came back to us and said, ‘Look, we know that you guys are going to be able to do this, but what we’d really like to see is some evidence that you’re actually making some changes.’ So we said, ‘Okay, fair enough, we’re always making changes. We’ll make sure that the new programs that we introduce, we can tie them nicely to the labour market.’ We wouldn’t be introducing programs if we didn’t think students were going to sign up for them and get jobs from them. So ‘okay, alright, we’ll do it, we’ll definitely do it.’

This appearance of reform, rather than material institutional change, may be the primary work that the Skills for Jobs Blueprint is supposed to do. The policy document itself is meant to encourage investment by convincing international energy companies that an appropriately skilled labour force will be available to complete construction projects. This is, in fact, the explicit goal of the Jobs Blueprint: it is “our commitment—a commitment to deliver the skilled workforce B.C.’s growing LNG and other sectors need” (Province of BC, 2014). In the legislature, a provincial minister stated that the aim of the Jobs Blueprint was to “understand our labour market and understand the workforce we have today—how we could grow it in order to assure liquefied natural gas proponents, for example, that we actually understand the industry and the needs” (Bond, 2015). Given that changes to education institutions could only affect the composition of BC’s labour force many years in the future, this “commitment” or “assurance” must, in large part, involve the mode of reform, rather than its result. Namely, the Jobs Blueprint’s commitment to public-private governance of education and to disciplining institutions through economic metrics is intended to assure investors that BC is neoliberalizing. The policy *performs* neoliberal reform.

This performance of neoliberalization also extends beyond the glossy policy document. The province has constituted the “Labour Market Priorities Board”, which includes industry representatives, and has undertaken extensive consultations with LNG proponents and other businesses in formulating labour market data. Universities have also participated in this performance by framing program changes in terms of the Jobs Blueprint. Displaying an orientation towards consensus-driven problem solving and other norms of neoliberal governance may also be important. The provincial minister responsible for the Jobs Blueprint insists that actors within universities were motivated by a desire to participate in the collective project of attracting investment in BC: “The great news is the response has been excellent from institutions. People are excited about stepping up, looking at how they can help contribute to making sure British Columbia has the labour market and skilled workforce that it needs” (Bond, 2014).

 In short, the commitment to market-oriented governance and to institutional reform in the interests of capital, as demonstrated in policy if not in practice, seems to be a significant part of BC’s efforts to attract capital. In a sense, jurisdictions such as BC are subjected to a regime of performativity similar to what Ball (2003) and Cowen (1996) describe as shaping universities. The surveillance of the market drives the provincial government to perform its adherence to neoliberal norms, and the surveillance of the state forces SFU to participate in this performance.

The lens of performativity could also help explain the differential stance of SFU administrators in relation to ECO Canada and the Skills for Jobs Blueprint. While the Jobs Blueprint demands universities participate in the provincial government’s entrepreneurial project, doing so may detract from universities’ own entrepreneurial attempts to improve their position in university rankings, access to research funding, and student enrolment. Specifically, the Jobs Blueprint’s framing of universities solely as job-training centres may clash with SFU’s performance of partnership, in which “engagement” with industry and other “partners” fulfills a higher social purpose. As one administrator stated, “That’s why I don’t quite like the Skills for Jobs Blueprint. It’s not just jobs. It’s going out and making sure that what we are learning and teaching within universities is going to be relevant to the world.” In addition, adherence to a mandatory program does little to generate prestige or differentiate SFU from its competition.

Accreditation through ECO Canada, by contrast, demonstrates that SFU is engaging in new projects and new reforms that set it apart from the competition. The actual changes that occur may be less important than what the competitive effort indicates about the institution. As ECO Canada states, “Accreditation is voluntary, so programs that choose to become accredited also demonstrate a culture of proactive, continuous improvement” (ECO Canada, 2015c). While mandatory programs and already-existing reporting requirements simply occupy administrators’ time and energy, voluntarily signing up for new supervisory procedures demonstrates the institution’s entrepreneurial spirit. Thus, both universities and the governments that (re)regulate them are enrolled in a regime of performativity that requires a “permanent revolution” (Peck, 2010, p. 7) of neoliberal reform.

**Conclusion**

This examination of SFU indicates that governments may continue to promulgate neoliberal reform projects even while these have little direct effect on already-neoliberalized institutions. Decision-makers at SFU clearly endorse the central logic of the Skills for Jobs Blueprint— that people, institutions, and governments must work to increase the value of their capital, and that the best way to do this is to engage with industry to discover its “needs” and how to meet them. In fact, it is *because* SFU administrators have accepted this logic that they reject the Jobs Blueprint. A government-centred approach is seen as ineffective for understanding the needs of industry and as inconsistent with SFU’s core mission of improving its competitive positioning. In other words, the Jobs Blueprint puts government in the way of a willing and mutually beneficial partnership between industry and universities. This partnership can be better achieved, and perhaps performed, through organizations such as ECO Canada.

In an era of normalized and generalized neoliberalism, what Roger Keil (2009) calls “roll-with-it neoliberalization”, direct industry-university partnerships may be more effective than aggressive government reforms at moulding higher education towards the needs of capital. For institutions absorbed in their own entrepreneurial efforts, arrangements such as private accreditation are far more appealing than government-mandated reform projects.

The state, of course, is neither uninterested nor absent from these processes. Fiscal austerity and devolved governance have responsibilized institutions, driving them to focus on entrepreneurial activities that valorize their human and institutional capital. Moreover, state funding has allowed organizations such as ECO Canada to facilitate relationships between industry and universities. This role of the state in facilitating neoliberalization may be all the more insidious in that it goes essentially unnoticed by the public. The Skills for Jobs Blueprint received considerable media coverage and elicited some public debate about the purposes of education, whereas a search of news databases for the “Sectoral Initiatives Program”, which funds ECO Canada, shows no relevant results. This “background” role of the state may be more effective in shaping universities, even if the appearance of strong government action may nevertheless be useful in attracting investment.

In examining reforms at SFU, I have been guided by theories of neoliberalism that emphasize the place-specificity and unique trajectories of neoliberalization projects as they interface with particular institutional histories and socio-political conditions (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Peck, 2010). Understanding specific neoliberalizations, therefore, requires fine-grained analysis of the institutions undergoing change and requires “engaging with those at the blunt and sharp end of processes of socioregulatory transformation” (Peck, 2010, p. 33). This is especially true where the *performance* of neoliberalization may be a primary motive of reform, irrespective of the institutional results. In such cases, the view of restructuring projects from inside targeted institutions may be significantly different from outside appearances.

In addition to a more nuanced understanding of institutions undergoing change, an up-close analysis of the effects of neoliberal reform projects can provide insight into the broader political-economic context that structures these reforms. The provincial government’s interest in neoliberalizing, and constructing a narrative of neoliberalization in certain strategic institutions, provides an indication of its changing orientation towards the entrepreneurial project of attracting LNG investment. For example, one interviewee responsible for SFU’s reporting under the Jobs Blueprint indicated that the provincial government is beginning to lose interest in whether the university is appearing to meet government targets. In this administrator’s opinion, this was directly related to the diminishing prospects for significant LNG development in BC. In contrast, public statements from the provincial government continue to declare its steadfast belief in the viability of realizing the “once-in-a-generation” opportunity of LNG.

Although I have argued that government-led reforms may be less effective than they seem, my intent is not to downplay the seriousness and profound impacts of neoliberal restructuring. Rather, my point is to emphasize the necessity of investigating, in detail, particular pathways of reform in order to ascertain their place-specific effects. Regardless of particular institutional impacts, the Skills for Jobs Blueprint and ECO Canada accreditation reinforce the idea that universities must constantly demonstrate their “relevance”. These policies, and the wider discourse that they reflect, put universities on the defensive, requiring them to justify their programs in terms of economic metrics and to appeal to market authorities to prove their effectiveness.

We should also consider how universities’ active participation in the performance of neoliberalization could be harmful in itself. By publicly declaring alignment with the logic of the Skills for Jobs Blueprint, SFU is asserting that a major function of universities is, and should be, to train people to meet industry “needs”. This discursive orientation will surely impact how faculty, staff, and students understand their own roles, which problematizes the notion that the university’s focus on job-training is simply a response to student demand. SFU may be interpellating students as job-seekers and then citing student demand as the reason for an increased focus on job-relevant education. Though this relationship may be difficult to untangle, it seems quite possible that "student demand" is determined less by students than by the practices of the university itself.

SFU’s public approval of the Jobs Blueprint and ECO Canada also endorses the economic knowledge produced by these programs. In effect, SFU is lending its institutional credibility to the assertion that students should train themselves for jobs in resource extraction. If LNG investment in BC does not occur on a major scale, as seems increasingly likely (Gomes, 2015), those who worked to align themselves with “industry need” will be left with few job prospects. Though SFU administrators might, in private, scoff at the idea of orienting BC’s education to the labour demands of LNG development, the university President’s statements in support of the Jobs Blueprint could negatively impact those naïve enough to believe him.

Moreover, by publicly committing SFU to “working towards meeting the targets” of the Skills for Jobs Blueprint, the university declares it is working towards the development of LNG, a project that promises serious environmental repercussions and further dispossession of indigenous people (see Bowles & Veltmeyer, 2015). Requiring SFU to frame its programs in terms of the Jobs Blueprint requires the university, in effect, to self-identify as an agent of colonialism. ECO Canada accreditation would further instantiate the university’s alignment with, and increase its explicit support for, industrial resource extraction projects. By seeking accreditation through ECO Canada, SFU is asserting that environmental science graduates should be trained to standards set by companies like TransCanada in order to be prepared to work for companies like TransCanada. How does that declaration affect students’ understanding of their role, both as students and after graduation? Does it foreclose the political possibilities of a university education? Precise answers to these questions may be difficult, but it seems that the university administrators pursuing accreditation through ECO Canada are not even asking them.

I do not wish to exaggerate the extent of neoliberal tendencies in SFU or universities in general. Most faculty I spoke with are strongly opposed to the logic underlying the Jobs Blueprint and ECO Canada. Most, however, seem to be unaware of both initiatives, which is problematic in itself, insofar as the university’s priorities may be altered with little resistance from faculty until after the programs are well established. The student representatives to university governance with whom I spoke were very aware of the Skills for Jobs Blueprint and quite critical of its aims, dismissing the notion that students are demanding more job-focused education.

Though direct resistance to these plans may be limited, SFU has clearly not arrived at Brown’s (2015, p. 198) depiction of maximally neoliberalized universities, where “all strata in public universities—staff, faculty, administrators, students—have grown accustomed to the saturation of university life by neoliberal rationality, metrics, and principles of governance”. Rather, SFU is a complex and contradictory institution, its various practices and purposes always in a process of being worked out. Moreover, contradictions have always existed within universities, especially that between the university’s functions of professional, practical training and the ideal of “‘pure’ science” (Ash, 2006, p. 246). Universities in a variety of political economic settings have also long been under pressure to conform to the competitive priorities of states. For example, 19th century Germany, 1950s USA, and 1960s China all attempted to ensure universities generated research and trained workers useful for enhancing national economic competitiveness (Cowen, 1996). Neoliberal ideology and reforms are distinctive, but the goal of repurposing universities for the benefit of economic and political elites is not.

I do not, therefore, wish to make a paean to the university of the Keynesian welfare state. Beyond pressures to conform to national competitive priorities, there was (and is) a great deal wrong with universities, including the reproduction of colonialist, racist, sexist, and elitist practices. Indeed, many universities have been and continue to be “ivory towers”, insufficiently attuned to the problems of the world. “Engagement”, therefore, could certainly be a worthy goal, but the major questions are engagement with whom and for what purposes. At SFU, the answers seem to be engagement with industry for the purpose of advancing entrepreneurial projects. Those who oppose the increasing neoliberalization of universities need to find ways to challenge “engagement” with corporate interests without privileging or defending an idealized model of the university of yesteryear.

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1. For example, the administration decided, seemingly unilaterally, to submit the university for institutional accreditation through the US-based Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), a procedure that requires a massive effort on the part of faculty and staff and raises concerns about compromising academic freedom. The VP Academic’s office describes the decision-making process as follows: “An application for consideration for candidacy was submitted to the NWCCU in the fall of 2008 and accepted by the Commission in January 2009. After further deliberation and investigation, a decision was taken by senior management to pursue accreditation by the NWCCU. In the fall of 2009, Senate and the Board of Governors were advised of senior management’s decision and informed on the process” (SFU, n.d.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)