# Post Whackademia? Putting the brakes on the neoliberal university juggernaut

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In an article published in the online magazine *The Conversation*, Professor Simon Marginson, formerly at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, and now at the Institute of Education, University of London, made a few interesting remarks about the current state of Australian higher education – remarks that would surely make many a senior administrator wince. 'In the current policy context', Marginson asserts:

> … world class universities are not those who provide the best programs or educate the most diverse set of citizens. They are not necessarily the most intellectually creative or far sighted institutions, and are not the most socially equitable. Nor are they those that best address the common problems of humanity. World class universities pump out the most global science, attract and hold the top scientists, generate lucrative research applications for industry, and lead in the rankings. For better or worse that is the present global standard (Marginson 2013).

Elsewhere, Marginson (2011) has questioned the neoliberal values of modernisation and economic enrichment that now drive university policies, and asserted that in real terms university education is somewhat less than golden: 'Universities have lost rationale, and need to reground themselves in the social ... If higher education is emptied out of its public purposes we can no longer justify its survival. The 21st century University needs to redefine itself as a creator, protector and purveyor of public goods'.

We could of course spend a lot of time debating what is meant by 'the social' and 'public goods' but reading between the lines Marginson seems to be arguing that the modern university's links to the ideological imperatives of economic growth, GDP, productivity and so forth have dramatically altered how educators, students, administrators and policy makers think about higher education. In contrast, Marginson's reference to the public good infers a utilitarian world view that takes stock of more than business and balance sheets and instead thinks more expansively about the health,

welfare and wellbeing of citizens both in this country and beyond. His call is for a return to the 'social', rather than continued immersion in the economic.

But if we are to have a meaningful debate about the future of universities both in Australia and elsewhere (because globally, universities are looking very similar in terms of policy directions and pedagogical practice) then this needs to be driven by academics, students and the broader public who, collectively, have serious concerns over the current direction taken by Australian universities. Many want to reclaim universities from one-eyed market triumphalists who regard higher education as nothing more than a product to be traded on the open market. However, as I'm going to suggest, there's a long way to go before any such meaningful dialogue can occur. With academics caught in a web of client-service relations, and variously reporting increased levels of work intensification, over-regulation, excessive top-down administration, less collegiality, discontent and ill health, then it's difficult to see over the corporate parapet at this juncture.

But before I am accused of harking back to the grey elitist past, or of being the purveyor of terminal misery let me say this: of course universities are incredibly complex, diverse and fascinating places. They are comprised of over 1.2 million students, 55,000 full-time equivalent academics and a vast pool of 67,000 largely marginalised casual employees. Universities generate billions of dollars in revenue and employ many talented and even brilliant teachers, scholars and researchers who, as research by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (2001) shows, are committed and passionate about their work. Universities also continue to produce thousands of knowledgeable, highly skilled and adaptable graduates who make significant contributions in various walks of life. I could go on.

But, there's one thing I think we can all agree upon: the university system has changed markedly over the past quarter of a century and much of this can be attributed to the reforms under the neoliberal Hawke government during the late 1980s. The upshot is the 3 Ms: marketisation, massification and managerialism. These

interlocking developments have ushered in an entirely different set of workplace practices and professional relations, as well as a stifling institutional culture of excessive regulation and bureaucratisation. They have also radically altered how and what is delivered in the classroom. While universities like to claim there is now more consumer choice, flexibility and better quality than hitherto, the reality is a little different. The assault on the liberal arts, growing emphasis on profitable courses and vocationalism has turned universities into what resemble training centres for the twenty-first century economy. The notion of a 'rounded education' in which the liberal arts play a central role in preparing students for active citizenship; where students have the time and space to leisurely ponder ideas and participate in what Professor Stuart Rees refers to nicely as 'intellectual promiscuity' is a fading vista.

Also, something has happened to the ways in which students experience the university. More and more of them are reporting a sense of disconnection with peers, academics and institutions in general. Most now work for lifestyle and survival reasons, and many struggle with 'work-life balance'. Online technologies have led to growing numbers of students studying at home, further isolating them from the on-campus university experience – a development gleefully encouraged by a number of vice chancellors. For many students, the spark, soul, relationality, passion and play has gone out of universities, replaced by a pervasive and dour sense of vocational functionality. Many yearn for more than today's universities can provide, despite all the talk of choice, excellence and innovation. Somewhere along the line, it seems, universities have forgotten about the purpose of higher education as a contributor to the public good, irrespective of career, salary packages, productivity and so forth. Economy has superseded the social as the driver of higher education policies. Universities have forgotten also that in an instrumental, functional culture the soul withers and what we are left with is the appearance of a 'community of learners' and a parodying of the past. Nothing seems quite real: talk of community, engagement and connection seems out of place, contrived and somewhat at odds with the lived realties of most students. Hyper-connection in a cyber cloud or simply wondering through one of the many university villages, hubs or collaborative spaces feels like a scene straight out of Truman Show. All that remains for the university is to ensure a compliant, productive, brand-conscious workforce, centralised educational delivery, effective marketing of the almighty brand – and, hey presto – here comes the latest conga-line of satisfied customers.

The problem of course is that the customers are not always satisfied – far from it. And it's not just me saying this: read the many student surveys that are out there, talk to students rather than hand them evaluation sheets,

and there emerges a worrying picture of isolation, loneliness and disconnection, as well as a sense that the university experience is an expensive and largely functional journey. It's not all doom and gloom though: most students talk glowingly about the quality of teaching, course content and the support they receive from their universities, at least in the initial stages. And, depending on your financial circumstances, you can avoid work and enjoy all the benefits of living in a university village or one of Melbourne's resplendent colleges. Under such circumstances university life, at least for the few, can be very satisfying indeed. But for most – and especially international students – the university experience is considerably less than glowing. Poverty, hardship, stress and isolation are the lot of many of these students. Many also feel short-changed by lack of contact with their peers and teachers, and complain of having to do more of their studies online. Others consider that although their teachers are dedicated to the task of content delivery, it feels like a process driven more by contractual imperatives than intellectual curiosity. The majority of the 100 or so students I have interviewed for an upcoming book say that the university experience feels too functional, too geared towards job training and therefore lacking the deep and critical learning that derives from having the time and space to consider the world and one's place in it. Many also view universities primarily as businesses whose main concerns are brand promotion and income generation. They are acutely conscious of being treated like customers rather than students and consider their 'choice' of courses is being shaped by the job market. And yet, as reported recently in a US study, students want more from their education (see Lederman 2014). They seek a greater focus on critical thinking, and a broader and richer curriculum that includes many of the disciplines that universities are disappearing in favour of more job relevant courses: philosophy, government, history, art, and literature.

Many academics, like me, oppose what universities have become. Predictably, we are quickly dismissed as fuddy-duddies, lefties, elitist troublemakers, and worst of all, impediments to progress. But what we're after is an open and honest public debate about the role and purpose of universities in the context of a rapidly changing world. We want to examine the consequences of the 3 Ms and whether and how universities can remain truly public institutions dedicated to the public good; and to ask whether, as supposedly independent institutions, universities should consider distancing themselves from the influence, say, of corporate donors and cashed up philanthropic alumni. We also want to revitalise teaching and learning, research and scholarship, to free them up from market constraints and to insert values based on social justice rather than job or industrial relevance. We seek to regard students like active citizens and globally savvy, critical thinkers rather than customers. And like students, parents, employers and others are telling us,

we want to reinvigorate the idea of a rounded education.

These aspirations are worth fighting for, but what worries me most these days is how academics themselves are responding, or not, to these various institutional challenges. Here are some uncomfortable truths:

- Only about 25 per cent or so of academics belong to the National Tertiary Education Union.

- There is no professional association representing academics as a whole.

- There is widespread fear and powerlessness among academics brought on by a stifling top-down, regulatory culture.

- Many academics have retreated into a no show, no tell bunker mentality that does little or nothing to question the current hegemonic order.

- The default position of many academics is, at best, to write critical articles for scholarly journals that will gain them brownie points rather than airing their views to a wider audience.

- Or, most commonly, academics tend to retreat to the sanctuary of corridor complaint, wine drinking and private expressions of discontent, often manifesting in mental and physical health problems.

It would of course be ridiculous to assert that all academics are basket cases or that they all naively embody the values of the corporate university; or indeed that no-one ever speaks out. I can think of many brave and principled Australian academics that have done just that: Simon Marginson, Raewyn Connell, Nikki Sullivan, Nick Reiner, Andrew Whelan, and Simon Cooper, to name a few. I also welcome the petitions drawn up by sections of the professoriate in 2010, calling for radical change to tertiary policies, and the many academics who try as best they can to resist the tyranny of workload formulas and the further bureaucratisation of higher education. But for every one of these academics there are dozens of others who feel reluctant to speak out or who simply go along with the *status quo*, often to avoid the unwelcome attentions of management. Personally, and notwithstanding those who occasionally sign petitions, my greatest disappointment in relation to the academic fraternity has been in respect of those seasoned, senior academics – the 'lumpen professoriate' as one commentator calls them – who know full well the realities of higher education yet hesitate or refuse to air their grievances beyond the confines of in-house committees. Many have simply given up and opted for the quiet life, while others are shameless apologists for a system that bedevils their academic colleagues.

That said, I recognise, as was pointed out to me by no less than a radicalised professor of accounting, that some senior academics try as best they can to shore up academic autonomy and freedom in various university committees, and for this they should be commended. Indeed, the accountancy professor spends much of his or her time in senate gatherings, submitting lengthy discussion papers and arguing the case for retention of the more traditional aspects of the academic profession. This is tough but necessary work that can reap benefits both for academics and their students. And yet, as we see on an almost daily basis, depending on the state of the market, academics and management are not always the best of friends as numerous redundancies, campus closures and the often bitter struggles over enterprise bargaining agreements testify.

It is against this backdrop that we have witnessed the emergence of many interesting developments that offer up both critiques and re-imaginings of the modern university. Such developments include: the Council for the Defence of British Universities, the US Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, the courage shown by academics at the University of Warwick in the UK and here, at the University of Sydney in protesting against cuts, the student protests in Chile, Germany, Australia and the UK, and the rise of free universities, and independent, progressive colleges in the US and Europe. Leaving aside my earlier comments, I also see hope emerging from a gathering scholarly discourse unfolding in the splendid *Australian Universities Review, Arena Journal*, in online sites like Uni*Ad*versity, and in many books about the vagaries of today's higher education system, inducing the spectre of institutional 'zombification'.

So what do academics in particular need to do in order to promote public debate and defend themselves from the onslaughts of the corporate university? Minimally, I would suggest the following:

- Academics might consider how they can develop a credible public narrative about the role and purpose of universities in democratic, socially just and civically engaged society in the context of what Marginson refers to as 'global public space...in collaborative networks, NGOs, cyber-space'.

- They might also set about debating more assertively the values that underpin today's universities and argue the case for the re-centring of the liberal arts.

- They might further seek to develop a counter-institutional narrative that speaks of cooperation, collegiality, communality, civic engagement, citizenship rather than simply acquiescing to the competitive ethos of the market.

- Academics might also seek to reclaim their role and purpose as public intellectuals rather than continuing to operate as service providers and income generators.

• Academics should of course continue to highlight the negative impacts of work intensification and the exploitative nature of casualistion.

• Routinely, academics might consider turning private discontents into public dialogue.

• They should consider joining a union, and discuss the possibility of establishing a professional association that has clout and invites respect. For some reason, professional associations strike fear into the hearts of autocrats.

• Academics might seek to build alliances with student bodies, radicalise their students whenever possible, and build links with academic activists in Australia and overseas.

There are many other things that academics can do to promote public debate on the parlous state of our universities. They can highlight the many disjunctures between all the marketing hype and the reality of what goes on in these institutions. They might engage their students in a dialogue about what is meant by a university education and how things could and should be very different. That at least would be a start.

## References

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## End Notes

1. This article is based on a keynote address delivered at the Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows National Forum, December 5, 2013.

## Author

Dr Richard Hil is Honorary Associate at the Centre for Peace and Conflict studies, University of Sydney and Adjunct Associate Professor, Griffith University, School of Human Services and Social Work Gold Coast. He is the author of *Whackademia: An insider's account of the troubled university*. The latter book attracted considerable public attention and was largely well received, especially among academics who identified readily with the vagaries of the modern university, as described in the book. Dr Hil's next book, with the provisional title, *Hollowed Halls*, is due to be published later this year. It concerns the university student experience and particularly its diminution in both relational and pedagogical terms. Hil attributes this to the changed nature of higher education brought about largely by the 3Ms: marketisation, managerialism and massification. Through extensive interviews and additional research material the book seeks to contrast the ceaseless marketing hype with the many less-than-enthralling realities that confront students as they traverse the modern university experience.

## Hospital

A pervasive hum, invasive lights,
white gown swooping hairy legs,
a skinny ghost whose nest-like-head
buzzes with static and stinks of cigarettes.
A woman afraid to be sent home
convinced that death is imminent,
and from a key locked room a wail
ascends the air to crest the brutal
surface of sedation.

While I drink tea
with an amiable addict, his pain denied
the lush Lethe of morphine, vigorous
doctors, on the upright side, rush to quell
the Pandora of unleashed cries, and my own
stricken daughter, behind her scarred
face hides, appearing oddly
unperturbed by it all.

*Michele Seminara*
*Manly Vale, NSW*

## a slew

the air narrows here

thin wires may be taut or tame,
    visible or invisible
    at neck or shin level

'not all of the violated wish to violate others'
    was something learnt long ago
    before what are now known as 'the changes'

a non-existent government of nested abstractions,
    a controlled haunting

so we rent an animal & ride out the light,
    resigned to living on weeviled grain,
    thankful we can see so little

whiskygrass outgrows us

some bow down with their backs to the gods

a tree grows out of the house

*Stu Hatton*
*Melbourne, VIC.*