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# SOCIAL ALTERNATIVES

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## IT'S TIME: The Re-form of Australian Public Universities



The theme for this issue, 'It's Time: The re-form of Australian public universities', is timely for the forthcoming federal elections in Australia, particularly as the higher education system is crucial to Australia's path forward at any time. While the university sector has gone through constant changes historically, the themed articles in this issue express significant concern about recent reforms where:

managers, administrators, academic staff and students now function under a commercial, transactional system of hierarchical power relations informed by 'managerialism' and 'new public management' principles (Hil et al 2022: 3).

While the articles go beyond critique and propose alternatives to the 'corporate university', this cover design specifically aimed to visually capture their quite complex concerns. A list of ideas developed by the guest editors of this issue provided the initial inspiration for the cover design.

A central feature of this design is a single chair in an empty room, signifying the exodus of academics in recent years, particularly during the pandemic, and as a result of the recent reforms. Another significant feature is the graduate caps, embellished with dollar signs, tumbling through the air. It is a convention at many universities that upon completion of the graduation ceremony the new graduates throw their caps into the air. The dollar signs signify the commercialisation of universities which are now being run by a 'corporate order based on radically different priorities and concerns' (Hill et al. 2022). Further, the textural 'grainy' quality over the image signifies the deterioration of the university system under these reforms.

### Reference

Hil R. et al. 2022 'It's Time: The reform of Australian public universities', *Social Alternatives* 41, 1: 3-6.

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### Social Alternatives

*Social Alternatives* is an independent, quarterly refereed journal which aims to promote public debate, commentary and dialogue about contemporary social, political, economic and environmental issues.

*Social Alternatives* analyses, critiques and reviews contemporary social issues and problems. The journal seeks to generate insight, knowledge and understanding of our contemporary circumstances in order to determine local, national and global implications. We are committed to the principles of social justice and to creating spaces of dialogue intended to stimulate social alternatives to current conditions. *Social Alternatives* values the capacity of intellectual and artistic endeavour to prompt imaginative solutions and alternatives and publishes refereed articles, review essays, commentaries and book reviews as well as short stories, poems, images and cartoons.

The journal has grappled with matters of contemporary concern for four decades, publishing articles and themed issues on topics such as peace and conflict, racism, Indigenous rights, social justice, human rights, inequality and the environment. Please show your support by subscribing to the journal. For other enquiries please contact a member of the Editorial Collective.

### The Editorial Collective

Editorial decisions are made democratically by the *Social Alternatives* editorial collective. Each edition involves the work and cooperation of a guest editor, liaison editor (to assist guest editors), general editor, poetry editor, short story editor, book review editor, cover designer and desktop publisher. A liaison editor is responsible for managing the editing and publication process. After contributions are blind refereed, the editorial collective has final control over publication. Where necessary the editorial collective calls on the advisory board to assist with refereeing articles.

### Contributions

*Social Alternatives* accepts work focused on the aims of the journal. The journal also accepts proposals for themed issues from guest editors. Proposals may emerge from workshops, networks or conferences. For specific enquiries about the submission of articles, short stories, poetry or book reviews please contact an editor with appropriate responsibilities.

Submissions of articles, commentaries, reviews and fictional works are subject to double blind peer review and should be emailed to the general article editor. Authors are encouraged to consider and reference papers previously published in *Social Alternatives* to promote ongoing discussion. Submissions should be double-spaced with page numbers on the bottom right. Academic articles should be approximately 3,000-5,000 words, commentaries and review essays between 800 to 1,500 words, book reviews 800 words, short stories 1,000 words and poetry up to 25 lines. Submissions must include:

- copyright release form
- title page listing contributing authors, contact details, affiliation and short bio of approximately 80 words
- abstract should be a maximum of 150 words
- three - five keywords.

Please use Australian/English spelling and follow Harvard referencing. Submit tables, graphs, pictures and diagrams on separate pages. Remove in-text references identifying authors and replace with [name removed for the review process].

For further information please consult our website:  
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## CONTENTS

THEME FOR THIS ISSUE: *It's Time: The Re-form of Australian Public Universities*

### Introduction

- 3 It's Time: The re-form of Australian public universities.....Richard Hil, Alessandro Pelizzon, Fran Baum

### Refereed Articles

- 8 A Brief History of Australian Universities.....Stephen Lake et al.  
17 Australian Public Universities: A crisis of governance.....Alessandro Pelizzon et al.  
26 How we got here: The transformation of Australian public universities into for-profit corporations.....James Guthrie and Adam Lucas  
35 Australian Public Universities and the Destruction of the Academic Community.....Oliver Vodeb et al.  
44 'Enough to make you sick!' Pathological Characteristics of the Australian Academic Workplaces..Peter Tregear et al.  
52 The Corporate University and its Impact on Health in Australia.....Fran Baum et al.  
63 Over the Horizon: Is there an alternative to neoliberal university governance?.....Richard Hil et al.

### Themed Commentaries

- 70 Academic Leadership in a Neoliberal Managerial World: An autoethnography of my career.....Margaret Sims  
76 Raewyn Connell on why and how universities need to change, and soon: Interview with.....Richard Hil

### Book Review

- 80 *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis: A University for the Common Good*....Geoffrey Lawrence

### General Commentary

- 82 1975 and *Mother I'm Rooted*: The legacy of Kate Jennings as anthologist.....Aidan Coleman

### Poetry

- 7 Monumental.....Rory Harris  
7 Little Sister.....Jude Aquilina  
16 The Sound of Colour.....Cary Hamlyn  
62 Equatorial.....Gemma Parke  
62 Doubled edge.....Jude Aquilina  
81 War is hell.....Tony Beyer  
84 Wellbeing Report.....Adelle Sefton-Rowston  
85 Ruin.....Gemma Parker  
85 In the know.....John Falzon  
85 Elsewhere.....Nathanael O'Reilly  
85 The German.....Peter Bakowski  
86 Shared Wall.....Nathanael O'Reilly  
86 first.....Rory Harris  
86 Chimp 1164.....Cary Hamlyn  
86 Loneliness.....Vivian Garner

# It's Time: The re-form of Australian public universities<sup>1</sup>

RICHARD HIL, ALESSANDRO PELIZZON AND FRAN BAUM

**U**niversities matter – most of us can agree on that. They remain a vital, indispensable part of our society. What happens to them as a result of government policies, changing values and altered governance arrangements matters greatly, too. Over the past few decades, universities have changed beyond recognition. Now considered a major ‘export industry’, they operate more like private corporations than public institutions. They have embraced the principles of neoliberalism, stressing the needs of the economy above all else. The whiff of class privilege that once pervaded the fabled hallowed halls may have diminished, but it has been replaced by a corporate order based on radically different priorities and concerns.

Managers, administrators, academic staff and students now function under a commercial, transactional system of hierarchical power relations informed by ‘managerialism’ and ‘new public management’ principles. Although supposedly run more ‘efficiently’ by specialist managers – a claim we contest – universities are increasingly unhappy, troubled places in which claims of ‘excellence’ and ‘high-quality education’ mask the many problems that lurk within.

While this shift has been occurring for a few decades, the recent COVID-19 pandemic brought its implications and consequences to the fore. The traditional nature and discourse of academia had already slowly but steadily been transformed into something radically different from what it had been traditionally. The pandemic brought this to the fore and revealed a kaleidoscope of mounting catastrophes: from the 40,000 jobs estimated by the Australia Institute to have been lost in 2020 to the growing ratio of managers to students and academics, from the widespread imposition of asynchronous digital learning resources to widespread bullying and wage theft.

In this special issue of *Social Alternatives*, we highlight many of these problems, with a particular attention to those relating to institutional governance. We believe that it is here, where university governance is located – in the interstices between State legislation and Federal funding – that universities find themselves in a state of serious and enduring crisis. We do not use the word crisis

glibly. To us, it signals the current parlous condition of the modern university which, according to many observers, is in terminal decline.

The crisis of which we all speak in this special issue is not simply about fiscal mismanagement and over-regulation – of which there are many examples to ponder. Rather, we worry about the modern university principally because it reflects a range of instrumental values that have impacted every aspect of institutional life negatively: from curriculum development, pedagogical matters and research priorities to organisational decision-making and academic health and wellbeing.

The emphasis on commercial-industrial imperatives has dimmed the spark of universities, turning education into a commodified enterprise and campuses into drab, functional places devoid of any meaningful sense of community. Our main concern, however, is that if universities do not change course, and quickly, they will ultimately be emptied of soul and social purpose. Their role as bulwarks against tyranny and corruption, and seekers of truth, will simply melt away. This would be disastrous for democracy itself – and that’s why the task of transformation is so urgent.

What we show in this special issue is that the current crisis universities find themselves in demands that we seek more inclusive, healthy and effective ways of managing them. In short, universities do not have to undergo a living death. They can and must contribute to the health and wellbeing of society, ensuring (yes) that students are prepared for jobs, but also with a critical awareness of the changing world around them. This means enabling staff and students to actively and meaningfully participate in the processes and practices of governance, learning to act cooperatively, and making collective decisions for the benefit and wellbeing of all parties.

The fact is there are many alternatives to the neoliberal university. Numerous other countries celebrate fee-free higher education and governance arrangements that are open, democratic and accountable. As we demonstrate

in this issue, the policy and governance of the Australian neoliberal university are out of kilter, both internationally *and* (at least historically) domestically. Higher education institutions across Europe, in South and North America, and in many other parts of the world offer fascinating examples of the possibilities of a different kind of university – one that promotes a more rounded, citizen-oriented and critical education focused on the common good rather than fragmented private interests. Such universities are governed collectively by *all* those who make up such institutions. What these international examples remind us is that universities do not have to be run like top-down, private corporations.

It is in this regard that we have sought to prefigure alternative governance arrangements for universities by explicitly engaging in a process of collaborative authorship in the production of this special issue. As a collegial group of seasoned academics from various sandstone, redbrick and regional universities, we have sought agreement on the focus of this issue, and extensively commented on each other's contributions. As the various articles can attest, each of the authors in this special issue is profoundly and uncompromisingly passionate about the idea of the university as a *public* institution dedicated to the common good. We all believe that policy making and governance should not be the preserve of governments or the 'manageriat'. For us, being an academic is more than a job: it is a calling, a vocation. Along with students, general staff and the wider community, we all insist on active and equal participation in university governance.

We acknowledge the important contributions made by many scholars in the field of 'critical university studies'. Building upon the existing scholarship, the articles in this special issue seek to lay the foundations for a public conversation about the need for reform in Australian universities. Lake et al. remind us of the historical evolution of Australian universities, while contributions by Pelizzon et al. pinpoint the emergent context and current problems associated with university governance. Guthrie and Lucas alert us to the often-distorted financial narratives used to justify the changes we observe, while articles by Vodeb et al. and Tregear et al. discuss the lived realities of day-to-day academic life. Baum et al. highlight the health impacts, both individual and collective, that the new standards of academic life have on academics, students, and society at large. Finally, in alerting us to other possibilities, Hil et al. discuss the many alternative models of higher education that exist globally, and which offer the prospect of a regenerative university capable of responding to the challenges of the twenty-first century. A personal commentary by Honorary Professor Margaret Sims and a moving interview with Professor Emerita Raewyn Connell conclude the issue. As highly respected academics who have long actively

supported the democratisation of the modern university, both Professors Connell and Sims reflect on what this struggle has meant personally and professionally and why it is important that universities change course, especially in relation to how they are governed.

As we confront the many national and global crises before us, the task of transforming the current 'neoliberal' university has never been more pressing. But, as academics committed to foundational change, we are seeking to 're-form' and not simply 'reform' universities. What is required now is a serious public conversation about the values and principles that can help guide universities toward a better state of being by making them more democratic and relevant to the problems of the current era. To continue with business as usual is to consign Australian universities to historical irrelevance.

### Authors

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With special mention of all the authors of this issue: Fran Baum, Raewyn Connell, Maureen Dollard, Matthew Fisher, Toby Freeman, James Guthrie, Renaud Joannes-Boyau, Stephen Lake, Adam Lucas, Kristen Lyons, Adrian McCallum, Lareen Newman, David Noble, Justin O'Connor, John Orr, Gerd Schröder-Turk, Margaret Sims, Fern Thompsett, Peter Tregear, Oliver Vodeb.

### Notes:

1. This special issue is the result of ongoing cooperation and discussions among the members of Academics for Public Universities (<https://publicuniversities.org>).

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Several of the articles in this themed issue were written jointly by several authors. Short biographies are provided at the end of each article but as there are several authors for some articles and several of the authors are involved in more than one article, we include a fuller biography for each author below. The authors are members of Academics for Public Universities (<https://publicuniversities.org>), a group of academics interested in undertaking independent research to understand, address, and improve the current state of Australian public universities. The group is comprised of academics from a wide range of Australian universities and diverse disciplines, as well as Emeriti Professors and retired researchers.

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### Monumental

The ease of monuments  
stone & bronze

& place the past  
where we can see it

can rattle it  
& the tough bit

what to say  
on the plaque

& what will  
we tell the children

**RORY HARRIS**

### Little Sister

He'd call to see my brothers,  
stand on the verandah  
and let the ash build up  
on the tip of his smoke  
till it sagged – hypnotising to watch  
like waiting for a slow drip from a tap –  
and somehow he knew without looking  
when to flick it away from his feet.

How Marlon Brando, how Simon Templar  
he seemed to me as he chatted  
to my older brothers, a soft packet  
of Camel always tucked  
in his upper sleeve  
like a robot's bicep.  
I longed for his smiling eyes  
to notice me, the little sister,  
as more than just a kid.

And when he did – and I slid across  
the EH Holden's bench seat  
closed my eyes and waited,  
I went from bliss to gag  
at the smell of his Camel breath  
and the shocking wet eel  
that swam down my throat.  
No wonder I never took up smoking.

**JUDE AQUILINA**

# A Brief History of Australian Universities\*

**STEPHEN LAKE, RENAUD JOANNES-BOYAU, ADAM LUCAS,  
ADRIAN McCALLUM, JUSTIN O'CONNOR, ALESSANDRO  
PELIZZON, PETER TREGEAR AND OLIVER VODEB**

*This article aims, firstly, to provide a sketch of the humanistic tradition of education from Classical Antiquity through to the present, as the cultivation of the whole person as an individual and as a responsible citizen, which arguably still underpins European and other western education systems but which has been eroded in Australia. Secondly, this article aims to provide an outline history of universities in Australia from 1850 to the present, highlighting by way of examples consistent patterns and failures, and the sources of challenges now facing the sector. Thirdly, this article provides a brief summary of those challenges, some of which have been exacerbated but not caused by COVID-19.*

**KEYWORDS:** Australian universities, history, history of education, history of universities, educational systems.

## Pedagogical Prelude

The dominant western tradition of education is around 2,500 years old and originated in ancient Greece (Jaeger 1944). As it evolved in Antiquity, it comprised a 'liberal' (and comprehensive) education in philosophy, which included the natural sciences and medicine, and other Arts. Its primary purpose was to prepare individuals to be responsible citizens (Dewey 1916), and increasingly, since the Italian Renaissance, the 'formation' of the whole human person and the development of their potential and talents. The original meaning of a 'liberal' education had nothing to do with direct employment. William of Conches, for example, wrote in 1147/9:

[...] those who could advance in science [i.e. knowledge, scientia] if they devoted themselves to studying [...] follow a different path in life: they crave wealth and profit and, while impoverishing their minds, only labor to enrich their coffers (Ronca and Curr 1997: 4)

This remains the governing conception in most European education systems today, and is the understanding of education embedded in UN human rights (ICESCR 1966, art. 13). To varying degrees, this traditional conception of tertiary education has also shaped Anglophone education systems (Rudolph 1990).

The modern university is a direct heir of its medieval foundations (Ridder-Symoens 1992, 1996; Rüegg

2004, 2011), both in constitution and in conception. The medieval appellation *universitas* referred primarily to the body of students, who collectively enjoyed certain legal privileges. Universities were then chartered by the papacy or a monarch, and were governed by their academic community. They generally consisted of one undergraduate faculty of philosophy, and three higher faculties of canon and secular law, medicine, and theology. Admission to a higher faculty required completion of a baccalaureate in philosophy. The philosophy curriculum was based upon the seven *artes liberales*, comprising the *trivium* of Latin grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (Koch 1959; *Artes libéraux* 1969; Wagner 1983). Curricula from the thirteenth century onward illustrate the breadth of philosophy, including the natural sciences, ethics, and the linguistic Arts (Thorndike 1944: 64–5; Hemesse 1974; Lafleur 1988). The Arts and the natural sciences were thus traditionally united within a single conception of knowledge, and they remained so (in some sense) until the earlier twentieth century (e.g. Taylor 1975; Rohs 1991; Lessing 2011). The Scientific Revolution (Mandrou 1973; Butterfield 1957; Cohen 1987; Grayling 2016; Kuhn 1970) and the Enlightenment (Dupré 2004; Israel 2001, 2006, 2012; Kondylis 2002) would have been unthinkable without their participants having been educated in both discipline areas, and areas such as law (Bloch 1961; Haakonssen et al. 2006) and the Arts (Summers 1987) were profoundly influenced by a new and changing understanding of Nature [i.e. natural sciences] through the early modern period (Beiser 2002, 2003; Blanning 2010;

Rousseau 1750). Therefore, the polarisation between 'the two cultures' that appears in the Anglophone world since, for example, Snow (1959/1964; Leavis 1962; Berlin 1974) is of very recent vintage.

As Campbell and Proctor note, every national education system reflects its longer history of, its attitude towards and its notions of, the importance of education (*Griffith Review* 11/2006). Since the 1980s, Australia's university system has progressively departed from the traditional western history and philosophy of higher education to become increasingly anomalous, rejecting both its humanistic and civic importance and orienting itself almost exclusively towards purported economic needs. The early settlement history, the 'tyranny of distance' (Blainey 1966), and initial economic under-development have arguably always disposed Australian society in this direction. Notwithstanding the original influence of British, American and German universities on Australia (Forsyth 2014: 7-14; Coardrake and Stedman 1998: 7-11), the modern 'idea of an Australian university' (Watts 2002; Duke 2004) is no longer a reflection of those traditions.

### **Colonial Beginnings**

In Australia, three periods of university foundations can be readily identified: firstly, the four universities established before Federation, and the two more a decade later; secondly, from the 'Menzies era' to the Whitlam years, with the establishment of twelve universities; thirdly, the Hawke-Keating era. Beginning with Bond University in 1987, there were also attempts to establish other private institutions: some failed, while others struggled and needed government funding to survive. While there are now four private universities, overall the attempt to create a diverse public-private university landscape in Australia on an American model has not succeeded (Maslen and Slattery 1994; Coardrake and Stedman 1998; Forsyth 2012, 2014; Macintyre 2010).

The University of Sydney was founded in 1850 following closure of two earlier colleges and demand for locally qualified barristers. The University of Melbourne followed soon thereafter in 1853. The establishment of these colonial universities was not a response to widespread public demand, but the initiative of some leading citizens to provide professional education, to prepare young men for future leadership positions, and to have a 'civilising' influence on the colonies. The Universities of Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide (1874) reflected a combination of influences of traditional Oxbridge, and innovative London (1836) and Scottish universities. The Universities of Tasmania (1890) and Queensland (1909) looked increasingly to progressive regional British universities, and the University of Western Australia (1912) to 'land grant' American universities. ANU's (1946) conception

as a research-oriented university was a response to war experience and the anticipated needs of the Cold War for more trained researchers.

By 1895, four universities enrolled 0.16% of the population. By 1914, 3,300 students (almost 1.0% of the population) were enrolled at six universities. By 1939, however, universities enrolled only 14,000 students, or 0.20% of the population. From 1881, women were admitted to universities, and, in some disciplines, by 1914 constituted 50% of enrolments. In this early period, half or more academic staff came from Britain, or were Australians trained there. The first Australian PhD was awarded by the University of Melbourne in 1948. Universities received initial private endowments, but depended upon continuing state government funding, which was unreliable and insufficient, especially during the Depression era. With some exceptions, little research was done, and was not regarded as important until the post-war period. Early attempts to establish practical disciplines such as engineering in universities had little success.

### **The 'Menzies Era'**

Post-war developments in education were influenced by an influx of returned servicemen into universities. Enrolments rose to 32,000 by 1948, and increased by 30,000 again through the 1950s, although the program supporting returned service personnel ended in 1953. Tertiary education, it was then argued, needed to support economic development, and more teachers for the 'baby boom' generation were needed. However, universities lacked sufficient resources to manage such expansion.

As a result, in 1951, the Commonwealth provided the first grants to universities, and in 1957 established a committee on universities, which produced the *Murray Report*. Among other things, this found overcrowded lecture theatres, high attrition rates, underpaid staff, a dearth of university-based research, a lack of adequate equipment and funding, a culture (in some disciplines) that viewed postgraduate work as unrelated to their interests, and that education needed to prepare graduates for different types of career, but also to strengthen a democratic civil society and to preserve culture. The report recommended increased funding, and then Prime Minister Robert Menzies established a permanent *Australian Universities Commission*. By 1960 there were ten universities, including the newly established University of New South Wales (1949), University of New England (1954), and Monash University (1958).

Attention then turned to state-based technical and agricultural colleges, institutes of technology, and teacher training colleges. The *Martin Report* (1965) established a binary system of post-secondary education divided

between universities awarding degrees, and Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) providing vocational training to diploma level. CAEs would be funded by the Commonwealth, and by the 1980s their enrolments exceeded those of university students. University enrolments doubled through the 1960s, primarily due to the 'baby boom' generation reaching university age, with such growth continuing into the 1970s. Pressure for more university places led to a host of new universities: La Trobe (1964), Macquarie (1964), Newcastle (1965), Flinders (1966), James Cook (1970), and Griffith (1971).

The Martin Report also found that university staff numbers had increased by 350% over the previous decade, and expected this would continue for another decade, although it doubted that Australian universities were capable of providing sufficient graduates for that purpose. Expansion and funding challenges increased pressure on management: the first full-time Vice Chancellors (VCs) appeared at Sydney in 1927, Melbourne in 1934, and Adelaide in 1948. At first, their role was primarily dedicated to raising money and administering relatively independent departments. Furthermore, it became seen as necessary to appoint senior professors on merit to permanent administrative positions as Deans. Reform of management practices in the 1960s-1970s led to the establishment of student consultative committees, the overall reorganisation of distinct disciplines as schools and large departments, and the general reduction of the previously wider powers of professors to designated positions of responsibility.

### The Whitlam Years

Post-war growth slowed by the early 1970s, and university revenues were scarcely greater than their costs. Under such circumstances, universities could not sustain indefinite rapid growth. In 1974, the Commonwealth thus assumed full responsibility for funding tertiary education, and established the *Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission*. Demographic pressure for continued growth remained, but some students were channelled into cheaper CAEs and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges. Murdoch University was established in 1973, Deakin University in 1974, and the University of Wollongong in 1975. In 1974, the Whitlam government removed student fees for university. However, free education, even accompanied by generous scholarships, failed to result in the hoped increase in university enrolments, which only occurred in the late 1980s, when free education was replaced by the *Higher Education Contribution Scheme* in 1988.

Throughout the period 1960-1975, funding for academic staff kept pace with student enrolment numbers, and an acceptable full-time teacher-student ratio was maintained.

In 1982 this ratio was around 1:11, but by around 1992 it had fallen to 1:15, and it is now on average 1:30.5, with sixteen universities higher than this in 2021 (THES 2021). While student numbers remained stable through the same period, recurrent grants per student fell by 6% between 1980-1984, and academic appointments were then frozen.

The 1979 *Williams Report* under the Fraser government anticipated radical shifts in policy and attitudes in the 1980s. The Federal Government ceased to regard education as a right or as being concerned with culture and a broader civilising project, and rather was increasingly seen as serving national economic growth by directing it towards workforce needs. The re-introduction of student fees was proposed, some amalgamations of CAEs occurred, academic tenure was attacked, and concerns about credentialism were raised.

### The Dawkins 'Reform'

The most radical transformation of the Australian higher education sector occurred under then Minister for Education (1987-1991) John Dawkins. Its concerns included globalisation, increasing use of technology in workplaces, international trends away from manufacturing towards a post-industrial 'knowledge society', Australia's lack of international competitiveness (Jones 1983), a renewed concern about the need to support economic growth and development, the 1982-3 recession, tensions in the binary university-CAE system, an overall trend towards the privatisation of public entities, and public sector reforms involving further cuts to public funding and government restructuring, which inevitably also affected universities. Dawkins imposed a top-down reform only superficially informed by various consultative processes, with particular reliance on the 1985 *Review of Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Education*. In 1987, he released a 'green discussion paper', and six months later, in 1988, a little amended 'white policy paper'.

According to Dawkins's plans, the university sector would be streamlined, with fewer and larger institutions. The federal education department would negotiate a profile of activities with each university in terms of national needs and priorities and allocate funding on that basis. All universities would compete for public research funding, via the *Australian Research Council* (established in 1988) grants. At the same time, government divested itself of tight control over internal governance of universities, which, via their State-based enabling legislation, progressively and increasingly passed to their VCs, boards, and substantively increased managerial levels of Pro-Vice Chancellors (PVCs), Deputy-Vice Chancellors (DVCs) and Deans.

The implementation of this 'reform' was rapid, and resulted in eighteen universities and forty-seven CAEs in 1985 becoming thirty universities by 1991, and thirty-five by 1995.<sup>1</sup> Criticism of these changes was considerable but largely ineffective. Notwithstanding initial flaws becoming readily apparent, the larger implications of this 'reform' did not become very visible until the COVID-19 pandemic. Government and other reviews of the Dawkins 'reform' did not in fact identify many of its implications as being problems at all (Croucher et al. 2013).

### **The Howard Government**

In 1996, the federal budget imposed 'efficiency dividends' on universities. Over a four-year period, \$2 billion was cut from university funding. The Federal Government refused to pay university salary increases based on Enterprise Bargaining Agreements above a minimum safety-net figure. These measures imposed unprecedented constraints on universities, which were then forced to pay salary increases beyond the government base level themselves: this necessitated cutting either academic staff costs or other expenditure. Concurrently, degrees in excess of \$100,000 were introduced for international students. To ensure the maintenance of quality of education, three 'quality assurance rounds' were held, with short institutional visits by a small group of experts. However, Coaldrake and Stedman assert that this process was flawed due to its extreme rapidity, and resulted in no permanent regulation (Coaldrake and Stedman 1998: 21).

The subsequent *West Review* (1998) was intended to provide strategies for the sector for the next two decades. It emphasised the importance of quality teaching, the need for research to contribute to economic growth, some deregulation and flexibility in administration, increased competition in the sector and the need to adapt to new technologies, further consideration of the relationship between university and Vocational Education and Training (VET) sectors, and that the sector could not continue to be funded as it had been.

The government did not immediately address its recommendations, and the *Nelson Review* (2002) further found that course delivery costs were increasing, while disadvantaged students remained under-represented and attrition rates were around 30%, universities were over-enrolling, graduation rates reflected an OECD average but PhD graduation rates were comparatively high, the teacher-student ratio was higher in Australia than in other countries, universities in Australia were more dependent on student contributions for funding than many (though not all) comparable countries, and total expenditure as GDP% was lower in Australia at 1.5% than in America, NZ, Canada and Sweden (but higher than in the UK). Furthermore, the report found a lack

of financial and corporate expertise in the governance bodies of universities (despite already enormous changes in governance towards greater business orientation). As a result, it was recommended that government should determine overall numbers for places across disciplines and universities, and fees should be deregulated, allowing institutions to increase their fees over base rates determined by government.

The government responded with *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* (2003), and legislated some measures to take effect in 2005. These focussed upon some increased funding while allowing universities to raise more funding from student fees, new scholarship programs for disadvantaged students, support for more Indigenous involvement as academic staff and in a policy advisory capacity, and measures to improve the overall quality of teaching. The principle of calculating government funding accruing to enrolments across various discipline areas was established, and enshrined in the 2003 *Higher Education Support Act (Cth)*, which defined categories of providers, the framework for funding, and the overall aims of universities. This system was recently modified by the 2020 *Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Act (Cth)*.

### **The 'Enterprise University'**

The 'enterprise university', as defined by Marginson and Considine (2000), denotes the managerial transformation of Australian universities already underway through the 1990s as part of the Dawkins 'reform' into their modern structure. Notwithstanding considerable variations in stages of transition and structures, the authors suggest, all tertiary institutions tended to reduced diversity, leading to increased competition while at the same time minimising differences upon which one might be preferred over another.

Arguably, Dawkins sought to simplify the landscape of post-secondary education, increase completion rates of secondary schooling and facilitate greater access to tertiary education, while reducing both government funding of the sector and responsibility for it. This created a fraught environment necessitating stronger economic management and more effective means of attracting other sources of funding. Traditional academic structures of governance were thus viewed as something to be removed. The suggestion emerged, without substantive evidence, that academics required more pervasive evaluation and control to ensure their performance (Forsyth 2014: 99-100), and this alleged academic laziness was used to attack tenure. Academics were routinely characterised as 'god professors', 'elite boys' clubs', 'dead wood', and as impediments to effective

management (Forsyth 2014: 80). This simplistic definition of an entire professional cohort in such simplistic terms nonetheless justified its removal from any governance body, including its own areas of expertise.

Executive power has thus been progressively concentrated in the person of the VC, who delegates powers only to a limited cohort of PVCs/DVCs and Deans; at the same time, academic, student, union, and general community representation on decision-making bodies has been reduced to a largely powerless minority, with many boards effectively 'managed' by VCs. The principal orientation of this governance is financial, not pedagogical or civic, and its model and performance metrics are those of business corporations. Yet, although the entire Australian public is the principal 'stakeholder' in universities, the concept of the university as a public service and resource has been all but destroyed.

Marginson and Considine found that the systems that have replaced the 'community of scholars' in order to achieve both more effective governance of increasingly complex institutions in a changing and challenging environment and a better interface between universities and the economy, have in fact tended to suffocate the very activities they are dependent upon. Allegedly, universities should provide the best possible education to Australian students across all discipline areas, education should prepare graduates for suitable employment, and some university-based research should serve national economic development and needs: overall, such priorities were not new in the 1990s; they emerged in the 1940s.

### **From the Rudd-Gillard Government to the Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison Liberal Coalition**

The 2008 *Bradley Review* was a substantial attempt to examine, yet again, the interface between the tertiary education system and national economic needs, and made forty-six recommendations on funding issues, disadvantaged and regional access to higher education, and issues relevant to improving research capability. It identified as problems diminishing government funding (which needed to be increased by 10% on the base rate), high teacher-student ratios, declining student satisfaction, and risks inherent in over-dependence upon the international student market. The government issued its response in 2009 with *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, which accepted many but not all of those recommendations. It commissioned the *Lomax-Smith Review* of 2011 into base funding, and established the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency* (TEQSA) in 2011 as a national regulator.

TEQSA is primarily responsible for accreditation of providers, determining acceptable use of the appellation

'university', ensuring quality and standards, and addressing other *ad hoc* issues. TEQSA has no more specific sectorial expertise than university governing bodies, nor has it publicly agreed minimum definition of standards, or of mandatory curricula content for degrees to be maintained by all institutions.

In 2014, the incoming Liberal Federal government conducted an overall audit with a view to eliminating duplication and increasing efficiency that also affected universities. Recommendations included reducing funding and increasing the percentage of student contributions, deregulation of fees, and more tightly directing research funding towards national priority areas. The *Kemp-Norton Review* of demand-driven funding further examined these issues and was concerned with overall reduction of government funding while ensuring that the sector remained sustainable within a limited domestic market.

The *Higher Education Support Amendment Act 2020 (Cth)* aimed to induce more students to take STEM and other 'priority' subjects by uncoupling the relationship of fees to costs of course delivery and instead offering lower fees as an incentive, while increasing fees for courses deemed professionally profitable or economically unnecessary. Since 2016, the Coalition government has cut an estimated \$12 billion from higher education funding (Lucas, personal communication). In order to improve regional access to higher education, a network of Regional University Centres (currently 25 since 2018) and Country University Centres has been established. These centres provide local access to video lectures, some tuition, and other resources, but do not all offer full degree programs.

Overall, Australia has long hosted some foreign students under various schemes, beginning with the Colombo Plan in 1950. From modest numbers of international students in the 1980s, numbers have continued to increase at a steady pace since. However, the largest increase of international students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and the partial transformation of our university sector into an export industry have occurred over the past decade. This now includes offshore campuses of fourteen Australian universities, and other international partnerships. The number of students thus increased almost exponentially over a very short period of time. In 1960, 53,000 students were enrolled in ten Australian universities; in 1975, the number had tripled to 148,000 students over almost twice as many (eighteen) universities; In 1985, 175,000 students were in nineteen universities; in 1997, over 650,000 students were enrolled in thirty-six universities. In 2019, there were 1,609,798 domestic and 758,154 full-fee international student enrolments at forty-three universities.

Compounded by other problems of university management and inadequate regulation discussed elsewhere in this issue<sup>1</sup>, the increased reliance on a growing number of international students has rendered Australian domestic higher education profoundly vulnerable, as became apparent at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had further problematic effects on our universities, including enormously increased dependence on distance teaching, increased academic staff workloads, mass redundancies of both full-time and casual academic and support staff, and increased financial constraints (Littleton and Stanford 2021). These problems, however, have not been directly caused by the pandemic, and their causes may be traced directly to the implementation of the Dawkins 'reform'.

### Patterns and Problems

This section extrapolates from the foregoing overview (and is supported by the evidence cited there) to posit questions for further consideration. Over the last 50 years, the predominant discourse has focused on an attempt to achieve all tertiary educational goals at the cheapest possible cost. While seeking to limit expenditure, the Menzies and Whitlam governments accepted responsibility to provide what funding was necessary to support higher education as far as possible, and in some cases increased it. It was only with the Fraser and then decidedly with the Hawke government that a fundamental shift occurred, whereupon governments no longer accepted that responsibility in full. This shift has, in turn, forced universities to develop alternative sources of income, including full fee-paying foreign student enrolments, but has also resulted in direct negative consequences for the overall quality of academic employment. High levels of attrition and student dissatisfaction can readily be correlated to the above trend.

Despite many government and other reviews and 'reforms' of the sector over the past 70 years (all of which have been purportedly motivated by the concern to increase accessibility and quality of higher education and to ensure it helps the country to meet national economic challenges), those objectives have never been fully met, and underlying problems, even when recognised by such reviews (such as poor teacher–student ratios, mediocre academic quality and standards), have never been fully and/or successfully addressed. Instead, a continuous process of sectorial reorganisation, establishment of new bodies, and changes to funding conditions has marked the governmental responses to the various reviews, and yet none of such rapid and often radical changes has resulted in a durable and efficient system.

A variety of government and collaborative agencies now exist that are intended to ensure quality in higher education, including the *Office of Learning and Teaching* ([dese.gov.au](http://dese.gov.au))

and the *Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching* ([qilt.edu.au](http://qilt.edu.au)). These reflect recommendations of reviews of the sector, and provide some useful data. Direct input by front-line university academics, however, is conspicuous by its absence, and is consistently mediated by a host of managerial structures. As a result, we posit that the manner in which problems are defined, outcomes and productivity measured, and solutions proposed, fails to fully understand and address the direct causes of those problems as experienced by those who regularly and routinely deal with them (the academic and professional staff, as well as the students), while measures ostensibly intended to address them have instead compounded them.

Regular comparisons with selected overseas tertiary education systems (overwhelmingly other Anglophone countries), rarely appreciate the radical difference in their public funding, governance, academic employment, standards, curricula and accountability, which remain vastly different, as do their underlying philosophy of education and supporting public secondary school systems.

The idea of a 'liberal' education as a defining trait of universities began to be challenged internationally in the nineteenth century by a demand for more technological and scientific teaching and research to support industrialisation.<sup>2</sup> The commodification of knowledge that has followed increasingly considers education as a consumer product that finances its own economic sector. This has inevitably led to an increasing inability to accommodate multiple conceptions and spheres of knowledge, with the result of rendering any knowledge not perceived to contribute to economic growth redundant. Over the last few decades, such threats to 'liberal' education in America have provoked a considerable response from academics (e.g. Bloom 1987; Donoghue 2008; Nussbaum 2010; Roth 2015; Zakaria 2015; also Collini 2012, 2017; Nichols 2017; Connell 2019; Fleming 2021).

Furthermore, the concept of 'demand-driven' teaching ignores the importance of permanently maintaining universities as a nation's largest concentration of knowledge and expertise, a reservoir of academic experts across a wide range of disciplinary areas for national benefit irrespective of fluctuating 'demand' or the vagaries of international markets and changing intellectual fashions, and the necessity of protecting it precisely in order to be capable of meeting increased 'demand' when it occurs. Such an approach also effectively denies that that reservoir makes any other contribution to the community other than its alleged economic benefit, thus erasing any notion of 'the public university'.

Notions of scholarly community, independence and collegiality have become obsolete and redundant, without a full appreciation of how they contribute to the teaching and research activities of the university, as well as the overall wellbeing and health of a well-informed ‘public’. Concepts such as ‘lifelong learning’, ‘critical thinking’ and ‘problem solving’ skills cannot be adequately achieved by universities increasingly deprived of a thriving, responsible, and largely independent academic community.

## Conclusion

There is now widespread consensus among academics and within the general community that the Australian university sector needs major reform (Howard 2021). Yet, the precise nature of such reform is open to debate. This article (and others in this issue) has sought to demonstrate that the increased managerialism of university governance has fundamentally failed to ensure the need for a stable and sustainable reform, notwithstanding a host of rapidly subsequent reforms that have not only regularly (and radically) altered the sectorial landscape, but also enshrined a ‘demand-driven’ discourse that is in direct contrast with the historical notion of a ‘public’ university and a ‘liberal’ education.

Numerous reports over decades have identified problems in the universities, yet the ongoing repetition of similar problems throughout all reviews and reports reveal that these problems have not been resolved. This may very well be because the actual causes of problems have been misdiagnosed, and the attempts to resolve them may have instead compounded and perpetuated these problems. For example, the currently much-debated ‘national skills shortage’ has apparently persisted for thirty years, and is a problem the Dawkins ‘reform’ was supposed to preclude, not cause (or, at least, perpetuate).

This article began with the traditional function of tertiary education to facilitate the full development of the individual human person and to prepare students to be responsible citizens of a democratic society. Such development has traditionally been seen as independent of any employment considerations, even though, naturally, a liberal philosophy of education and a view of education as professional qualification should be able to co-exist (and have indeed co-existed throughout the centuries). Although it would be naïve to believe that the acceptance of the former would *by itself* have prevented the problems now embedded within Australian universities, the increasing absence of an appreciation of liberal education in Australia constitutes a growing threat to our collective respect for humanity and to the preservation of a healthy democracy.

Naturally, modern universities cannot replicate the exact structures of their medieval forerunners, but they should

strive to replicate the ideals of those institutions, insofar as those ideals have not changed and have benefitted society throughout the centuries. Modern universities should situate their students, their academics and the entire community at the centre of their governance, as the actual constituents and beneficiaries of universities. They should cease to regard education merely as an ‘industry’ or as a ‘consumer product’, and should instead re-discover education as a public good and service. Indeed, the concept of ‘the public university’ requires the resources which universities represent (primarily their academic staff, their students, and all those involved in supporting them) contributing and remaining accessible to the entire community in ways not reducible to national economic priorities or merely through the provision of individualised education.

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#### **Notes:**

\* This article has been written in dialogue with – and in connection to – all other themed articles within this special issue. As a result, it is best read as part of the issue as a whole.

1. Curtin (1986), UTS (1988), Western Sydney (1989), QUT (1989), Charles Sturt (1989), Victoria (1990), Canberra (1990), Australian Catholic University (1991), Edith Cowan (1991), South Australia (1991), Central Queensland (1992), Southern Queensland (1992), RMIT (1992), Swinburne (1992), Sunshine Coast (1994), Federation (1994), Southern Cross (1994), and Charles Darwin (2003).

2. Dawkins (1987, 1988) and other papers and reviews continue to nod towards a 'liberal' concept of education. Bradley (2008: xi) for example, writes, 'If we are to maintain our high standard of living, underpinned by a robust democracy and a civil and just society, we need an outstanding, internationally competitive higher education system'. In practice, however, there seems to be no consideration as to how such a notion of liberal education should be maintained, and even the orientation of these documents is inimical to genuinely achieving that. 'An outstanding, internationally competitive higher education sector' taken literally, would mean establishing universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Ivy League universities, the French *grandes écoles* and CNRS systems, endowing and funding them appropriately including for HASS disciplines.

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#### **The Sound of Colour**

Since he became a cyborg, he can see  
 the opulence of colour in sound.  
 Spectacles occur by light frequencies,  
 the intensity of Newton-metres,  
 the innate sensitivity of hearing.

The city mall presents a concert, while  
 supermarkets bedazzle his ears;  
 each shopping aisle a new symphony –  
 the cereal boxes, red majors and  
 washing powders, minor blues.

Tonight, he will wear a melody to dinner –  
 a trill of yellow tie, a riff of navy jacket.  
 The implant in his spine will tingle and  
 rise up like 'Ride of the Valkyries'  
 or 'Stairway to Heaven'.

A walk through the park coaxes  
 a lullaby from trees – while at night  
 an opera unfolds in sombre violet shades.  
 He hears his way to the bedroom –  
 where the bed linen hails him with  
 a Hallelujah chorus of shocking white.

**CARY HAMLYN**

# Australian Public Universities: A crisis of governance\*

**ALESSANDRO PELIZZON, RENAUD JOANNES-BOYAU, STEPHEN LAKE, ADAM LUCAS, ADRIAN McCALLUM, DAVID NOBLE, JUSTIN O'CONNOR, JOHN ORR, GERD SCHRÖDER-TURK, PETER TREGEAR AND OLIVER VODEB**

*In dialogue with other articles within this special issue, in this article we argue that the financial crisis triggered by the onset of COVID-19 is revealing a failed governance structure within Australian public universities that has ultimately enabled the conditions that led to the crisis currently before us. We suggest that the impact of COVID-19 has laid bare a series of problems that were in the process of unfolding years before the pandemic hit. Finally, we will examine this failure of leadership through the lens of the statutory nature and governance structures of Australian public universities, cast against the current rhetoric that metaphorically equates universities with commercial corporations, to determine the extent to which such a metaphor is accurate, and ultimately (we contend) detrimental to an effective and efficient university sector.*

**KEYWORDS:** Australian universities, university governance, history of Australian universities, university reforms.

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it was widely predicted that Australia's higher education system would be hit hard due to the closure of the country's borders to international students and many universities' reliance on that revenue to remain financially viable. Most tertiary education analysts responded that this would precipitate a crisis in the system. Although the extent of the financial losses to universities has not been nearly so bad as most analysts had predicted, with many public universities recording cash surpluses at the end of 2020 (Guthrie and Lucas, this issue), most university executives have used the pandemic as a pretext to cut jobs, courses and subjects, and to rationalise faculty, departmental and school structures (Lucas 2021c).

The Australia Institute recently revealed that over 40,000 tertiary education jobs disappeared over a year, between May 2020 and May 2021 (Littleton and Stanford 2021). These numbers equate to 20% of the total pre-COVID-19 workforce, a percentile contraction two to three times higher than the average of total jobs lost in Australia since the onset of the pandemic (which, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, is estimated to be around 7.5%). This disproportionate loss of jobs had been justified on the basis of the predicted loss of revenue across the sector, blamed on 'reduced international

student revenue and income from investments, such as dividends' (Hurley et al. 2021a, 2021b). However, the actual loss of revenue, cast against an initial prediction of A\$3 to 4 billion (Marshman and Larkins 2020), has been recently estimated more accurately around A\$1.8 billion, equating to an overall decline of 5.2% in total revenues (Marshman and Larkins 2021). While the loss of revenue is staggering, the disproportionate reduction (in percentile terms) of lost jobs is perhaps even more concerning, particularly since a recent report by the NSW Auditor-General revealed that NSW universities have spent more money in redundancies and job cuts than they lost in international student revenue (Ross 2021a; cf. Audit Office of New South Wales 2021).

Moreover, the Vice-Chancellors overseeing such job cuts continued to command salaries among the highest in the OECD. After reaching an average of just above A\$1 million dollars in 2019, even with the relative cuts that have occurred as a result of the pandemic current salaries still far exceed the pay of any other public servant (including that of the Prime Minister) and, on average, are 11.26 times the average salary of Australian academics (more than twice their UK counterparts, where the ratio is 5.7 to 1) (Rowlands and Boden 2020).

At the same time, recent research starkly reveals an unprecedent shift toward a culture of managerialism. Croucher and Woelert (2021) show that, over the past 20 years, the number of people employed in (HEW defined) support roles has decreased by 70% and the number of people employed in regular professional roles has increased by 37%. Over the same period, there has been a staggering growth in middle and senior management, of 144% and 110% respectively, a symptom of the regressive effects of New Public Management as discussed by Guthrie and Lucas (this issue).

Although university Annual Reports have shown a consistent growth of both revenue and expenditures (as well as assets) over the past two decades, paralleling the growth in student numbers, this rapid growth has not been matched by a similar growth of permanent academic positions. This has led to a dramatic increase in staff–student ratio. No Australian university currently features among the top 100 universities for the best staff–student ratio (Times Higher Education 2021). On the contrary, while the average students-to-staff ratio among the top 100 ranked universities is 5.22 students to 1 academic, the average ratio among Australian public universities is six times higher, at 30.5 to 1.

The stark and deeply inequitable picture of the current state of Australian public universities is matched by a host of additional problems. Courses and subject offerings are being increasingly cut while the costs of some degrees have increased. Students are increasingly diverted to ‘self-directed’ online modules, a trend that is only partly attributable to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on campus life. This is accompanied by a decrease of direct contact-time with lecturers and tutors, notwithstanding the very clear student dissatisfaction with such a trend (TEQSA 2020) and the concerns expressed by some professional associations in relation to the quality of education (Schröder-Turk and Kane 2020). Democratic and inclusive committee-based decision-making processes in academia have increasingly been replaced by more managerial structures and processes, and concerns about the decline of academic freedom have led to the recommendation of a Model Code by former Chief Justice Robert French (2019). Bullying and wage theft consistently appear in recent news reports, while the casualisation of the workforce has reached unprecedented proportions: for example, the University of Melbourne, Australia’s richest tertiary institution, for example, has been recently reported by the ABC as employing 72.9% of its staff on insecure terms (Duffy 2020). Moreover, structural changes within individual institutions occur at an increasingly rapid pace (often as a result of a new executive member being appointed to a particular portfolio), while academics lament an

overall decline in the rigour and quality of the education, notwithstanding the proliferation of reporting forms and protocols allegedly designed to ensure the opposite.

That Australian universities are facing an unprecedented crisis is evident. However, while this crisis has been repeatedly construed as a financial one and has been blamed on the financial losses associated with the decline of international student numbers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Marshman and Larkins 2020; Hurley et al. 2021a, 2021b; cf. Ross 2021b), the above data renders such justification unsustainable, for several reasons. Firstly, the job losses discussed above appear to be utterly disproportionate to what other sectors of the Australian economy have been experiencing. Secondly, university executives, over the past decade, have relied heavily on an international student ‘market’ when such reliance was not (and still is not) necessarily required by the legislative framework that establishes and regulates Australian public universities (Howard 2021). Such a choice, made and endorsed by university governance bodies, is predicated on a ‘growth’ mentality that supports, justifies, and ultimately ends up relying upon staggering marketing expenditures and often lavish capital investments (Lucas 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). This mentality appears to differ radically from that of most of the world’s tertiary systems (Hil et al., this issue), with the immediately observable result that universities in most other countries do not appear to have been as badly affected by the current COVID-19 crisis as Australian universities have been.

In this article we argue that the financial crisis triggered by the onset of COVID-19 has laid bare the intrinsic failure of the governance structures of Australian public universities, the effects of which have been unfolding for years before the pandemic hit. We examine this failure of leadership through the lens of the statutory nature and governance structures of Australian public universities, cast against the controversial rhetoric that metaphorically equates modern universities with commercial corporations (cf. *contra* OmbudsmanSA 2021/02707), to determine the extent to which such a metaphor is accurate, and ultimately (we contend) detrimental to an effective and efficient public university sector.

### Australian universities today – a legal overview

In order to fully contextualise the current ‘crisis’ of Australian public universities, we begin by asking the question of what a university is, in legal terms. Universities have a long heritage as corporate entities (Russell 1993), having been structured as such for centuries (Compayré 1893). Therefore, unsurprisingly, the enabling legislation of all Australian public universities confers upon universities the capacities and powers of a body

corporate. However, it is important to note that the body corporate status of Australian public universities is created for special public purposes specifically designed to advance higher education, and thus, universities exist as *sui generis* corporate entities and should not be confused with general commercial corporations registered under the Corporations Act 2001 (Cth).

The establishment of a university as an autonomous entity provides a level of independence from government interference, as well as from direct control by government departments (cf. Hannah Forsyth 2014). It also means that a university has perpetual succession and exists separate from its governing body or members. Unlike Australian registered companies (governed by the *Corporations Act*), however, individual universities are created by special enabling legislation that also articulates the structure and membership of a university's governing body. Furthermore, while all Australian public universities (with the exception of ACU),<sup>1</sup> are statutory corporations, they are exempt from the general provisions of the *Corporations Act*, defined as 'exempt public authorities' for the purposes of S. 57A (Orr 2012).

Moreover, Australian universities are charitable institutions created to advance higher education and research for the benefit of the public. While it is possible that the legal status of Australian public universities as charitable organisations may not generally be well acknowledged by the public, by the universities themselves, nor, perhaps, by their governing bodies, the legal meaning of the term 'charity' is well established and relies on the pursuit of charitable purposes as defined by reference to the Preamble to the *Statute of Charitable Uses 1601* (43 Eliz 1, c. 4 Parliament of England). In the context of Australian universities, their charitable status stems from their charitable purpose to advance higher education.

To be recognised as a charitable entity, Australian universities are required to be registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC 2022). All Australian universities, established by both special legislation or by general companies' legislation (such as Bond University and the Australian Catholic University), are registered charities in accordance with the *Charities Act 2013* (Cth) and the ACNC. Indeed, the ACNC Charities Register records the main charitable purpose of Australian universities as advancing education and/or, higher education and research.

The enabling legislation of Australian public universities reaffirms and reasserts such a mandate. The most recent version of the *University of Sydney Act 1989* (NSW), for example, states the primary object of the University of Sydney (the oldest Australian university) is 'the

promotion, within the limits of the University's resources, of scholarship, research, free inquiry, the interaction of research and teaching, and academic excellence' (s6(1)), with a number of 'principal functions for the promotion of its object' (s6(2)). Any additional functions, including the exercise of commercial functions, the generation of revenue, and the provision of other services to the community are explicitly defined as ancillary 'as may be necessary or convenient for enabling or assisting the University to promote the object and interests of the University' (s6(3)(c)). Most other public Australian university statutes articulate very similar (if not always identical) goals and functions.

### Governance structures

While some similarities exist between registered companies and universities, their governance differs in relation to their decision-making organs. Registered companies possess two decision-making bodies (a general meeting of shareholders/members, and a board of directors as their governing body), whereas universities do not hold a general meeting of their members (which, as we will discuss further below, are their staff, their students and their graduates). Instead, enabling legislation confers all the powers of a university to their governing body, the meetings of which are generally not held publicly. This governing body, generally known as a university Council (although, in a number of cases, it is defined as the university Senate, and, in the case of Western Sydney University, as a Board of Trustees), has absolute responsibility for providing oversight of a university's management, its strategic planning and its legal accountabilities concerning its educational, financial, and commercial duties and liabilities. This governing body is assisted by entities generally known as Academic Boards (or, in some cases, and somewhat confusingly, as Academic Councils or Academic Senates), which are meant to provide advice on academic matters. All operational matters are entrusted to a figure known as the Vice-Chancellor (although the moniker President has become increasingly common, and the figure has been even expressly called, in one case, 'CEO').

Like all statutory bodies corporate, enabling legislation requires these decision-making bodies to govern in accordance with the statutorily defined objects and/or functions of the university described above (as well as all corollary legislation, such as, for example, the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (Cth)). Furthermore, the enabling legislation of all but one Australian public university<sup>2</sup> impose duties on members of a university's governing body to ensure care and diligence is undertaken, and that university governors act in good faith, in the best interest of the university and for a proper purpose when carrying out their functions

and exercising their powers for and on behalf of their university. The definition of 'the best interests of the university' is strictly intertwined with the definition of who the members of a university are, with enabling legislation consistently defining universities as comprised of their governing body, the professors and full-time members of the academic staff, the graduates and students, and all other members or classes of members of the staff as by-laws may prescribe (often meant to include permanent professional staff of the university). It logically follows that, in addition to statutorily prescribed goals and functions, the 'best interests' of a university ought to be construed as representing those of the groups of members thus identified.

Parliaments have seen fit to draft and impose statutory duties on university governors in a similar fashion and language to the well-established duties owed by directors of companies registered under the *Corporations Act 2001* (see, for example, ss180-183), and undoubtedly the interpretation given by courts as to the words used in expressing the statutory duties owed by university governors leans heavily upon cases that have examined those duties owed by directors and officers of registered corporations (Orr 2020). However, while the general and statutory law duties imposed on university governors are similar to those imposed on directors of registered companies in Australia, those of university governors should be interpreted in accordance with the specific language used in each university's enabling legislation.

When examined more closely, the actual composition of the governance bodies of Australian public universities reveals an interesting picture. At the time of writing this article (1 September 2021), of the total 564 members of the governance bodies of the 37 Australian public universities (from now referred to as Council members), only 185 (32%) were elected from within their respective institutions (this includes elected student and staff members and the Chairs of Academic Boards, or equivalent, but excludes Vice-Chancellors). Moreover, the professional expertise of each Council member can be evinced by the public profiles on each university's public website. Of this total, only 182 (32%) have any academic experience (this includes the completion of doctoral research, even without any further academic pursuit, but excludes undergraduate and Masters coursework), and only 179 (31.5%) have any experience working in the tertiary sector (including TAFE). At the same time, 342 (61%) come from different fields of employment, with 188 (33%) alone from the broad field of finance, management, business, corporate and industry. That means that the number of people with corporate expertise but no expertise in the tertiary sector, *by themselves*, surpasses the number of people who possess any direct experience in the sector they govern. By way of contrast, a similar examination of registered

companies such as Rio Tinto, Telstra or CSL (as examples of large registered companies), reveals that 73%, 72% and 78% respectively of Board members have prior experience in the sectors they operate in.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the cultural diversity of Council members fails to reflect the expected cultural diversity of Australia as a whole, including a notable absence of Indigenous representation, of people with disabilities and those from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

If universities are *not* commercial corporations, and if their governance bodies ought to be guided by goals and functions whereby the commercial component is only ancillary to their primary mandates, one may reasonably expect to see a predominance of expertise related to the primary statutory goals and functions of universities among the members of their governance bodies. Such, however, is not the case. Therefore, there exists an inevitable disjunction between the collective professional understanding of universities' governing bodies and the actions taken by university executives in relation to a host of academic matters. The question then reasonably arises as to whether such a disconnect between the expected and actual expertise of university Council members is related to the crisis experienced by Australian universities discussed above. We argue that it is.

### **University legislation: a synoptic overview of university 'reforms'**

If universities are *not* commercial corporations under Australian law, where does the justification for needing *business* people running universities like *businesses* come from?<sup>4</sup> In the late 1980s, the Hawke Labor Government began a process of radically restructuring Australia's higher education system by 'rationalising' the number of higher education providers throughout the country and abolishing one of the key policy reforms of the Whitlam Labor Government in the early 1970s: free university tuition (Lake et al. this issue; Guthrie and Lucas, this issue). The main architect of these radical moves was then Federal Education Minister John Dawkins. In the years immediately following the introduction of the so-called 'Dawkins reforms' and the passage of the *Higher Education (Amalgamation) Act 1989* (Cth), several new universities were created through the amalgamation of colleges of advanced education, agricultural colleges, nursing schools, art schools, and TAFE colleges (either *ex novo*, or through incorporation within existing universities). With similar motivations to those pursued in the UK's higher education system at the same time, the long-term goal of the reform was to increase the number of student places and lay the foundations for a mass tertiary education system (cf. Russell 1993).

Through the vehicle of the *Employment, Education and Training Act 1988* (Cth), the Dawkins plan also

involved the abolition of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission in 1988, which had in its various manifestations steered tertiary education policy throughout most of the post-war period (University of Melbourne 2021). A direct and intended consequence of these 'reforms' was that the Federal Government was now able to exert direct control over Australian universities in return for university funding, rather than being guided by the diverse range of expertise that had informed the Commission and its predecessors. This included the Federal Government granting itself the power to exert greater control over university governance, which had traditionally been a State government responsibility. The *Higher Education (Amalgamation) Act 1989* obliged State governments to 'harmonise' university-specific acts throughout the country in order to make their legislation consistent with the Federal reforms.

Consequently, in the years that immediately followed, all of the State-based university legislation (as well as the federal legislation governing the territory-based universities: ANU, the University of Canberra and Charles Darwin University) began to impose restrictions on how university governing bodies should be constituted. Although a wide variety of university governing body structures had been allowed under State and federal legislation prior to the Dawkins reforms, in the years that followed the number of elected staff and student members on those bodies was limited to minority representation. Subsequent amendments to the governance sections of public university acts have in most cases further reduced elected staff and student representation on university governing bodies and imposed a variety of different corporate-style governance requirements on those bodies.

The rationale provided by successive federal governments for the progressive loss of autonomy Australian universities have subsequently experienced is that they needed to become more 'modern', 'accountable', and 'responsive to community needs'. This was the expressly stated rationale for changing the governance structures of Australian universities in the Dawkins Report of 1988:

there are some governing bodies which are too large for effective governance, and too often a tendency for members of governing bodies to see their primary role as advocates for particular interests. Often in these cases there is a confusion of roles and objectives, to the detriment of strong and decisive management. While some members may feel responsibility to represent the views of particular sections of the institution or the wider community from which they are drawn, they have an overriding responsibility to act in the best interests of the institution (DET 1988: 102).

Such sentiments were repeated in the Report of the *Committee of Inquiry/Higher Education Management Review* (the 'Hoare Report'), commissioned by the Keating Federal Government in 1995, and were fully crystallised by Federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, under Liberal Prime Minister John Howard in the so-called 'Nelson Report' (also known as *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future*), where he further advanced the notion that universities are commercial corporation-like entities:

Universities are not businesses but nevertheless manage multi-million-dollar budgets. As such they need to be run in a business-like fashion (DEST 2003: 15).

Nelson was able to realise his vision for Australia's public universities with the successful passage of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (Cth). The original version of the *Higher Education Support Act* empowered 'the Commonwealth Grant Scheme Guidelines [to] impose on higher education providers requirements to be known as the National Governance Protocols' (s 33(1.a)), specifically requiring these protocols to be incorporated by State and Territory governments into existing university legislation. Protocol S, the most significant protocol with respect to university governance, removed the requirements for nominated members to have tertiary or local community experience, and prohibited State and Federal MPs from sitting on university governing bodies, while further reducing the ability of staff and students to participate in university decision-making processes:

the size of the governing body must not exceed 22 members. There must be at least two members having financial expertise (as demonstrated by relevant qualifications and financial management experience at a senior level in the public or private sector) and at least one member with commercial expertise (as demonstrated by relevant experience at a senior level in the public or private sector) ... There must be a majority of external independent members who are neither enrolled as a student nor employed by the higher education provider (7.5.35 Protocol S).

Although in 2008 the newly elected Rudd Federal Government repealed the Coalition's higher education legislation of 2004, including the National Governance Protocols, with the passage of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Removal of the Higher Education Workplace Relations Requirements and National Governance Protocols Requirements and Other Matters) Act 2008* (Cth), the 'Nelson protocols' have nevertheless continued to shape all of the university governance

structures in place throughout Australia, including the provision that a majority of members should be external appointees. Furthermore, the legislated processes and membership for Council subcommittees guarantee that external appointed members exert greater influence in determining future external appointments, potentially leading to a solipsistic mechanism of self-selection (Schröder-Turk 2021).

It should therefore be clear from this brief history of changes to university governance that the bipartisan erosion of university autonomy and of the ability of staff and students to have any substantive input into the management of Australian universities was accompanied by the emergence of a commercial discourse around tertiary education that undercut and arguably marginalised the (still current) statutory mandates of the universities' enabling legislation.

### **Reforming university governance: consequences**

With the above context laid bare before us, we can now turn our attention to the consequences of a university governance system underpinned by the commercial corporate metaphor that has emerged over the past few decades. The composition of university governing bodies and the professional background, expertise and ideological expectations of their members have consequences that extend beyond governance processes alone.

Although legally incorrect, Australian universities are routinely conflated, within the Australian discourse, with the commercial corporate sector (cf. *contra* OmbudsmanSA 2021/02707). This conflation occurs either directly – by asserting that universities are *de facto* corporations – or indirectly – asserting that universities must operate with the same principles of efficiency and efficacy as corporations. In a recent open letter, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Australia, Dublin-born and chemist-educated Professor David Lloyd unapologetically asserted the following:

I am not going to make any apologies to any ideological purists reading this, let's be clear, we are a business, we are a \$700m not-for-loss organisation, and our successful performance as a business directly enables the employment of a shade over 5000 people in full and part time continuing, fixed-term and casual roles (Lloyd 2021).

A casual reader may wonder whether Professor Lloyd's disciplinary background in such a different field of professional expertise qualifies him to make such an

assertion, and consequently wonder whether the ideology he laments is not, in fact, his own. However, more importantly, these words are reflective of the Dawkins and Nelson aspirations discussed above.

Nevertheless, despite increasing levels of managerialism and the business and financial expertise among the majority of Council members, the governing bodies of Australian public universities have failed to convert the significant surpluses they earned between 2008 and 2019 into sufficient reserves in the event of a crisis such as the current one (Guthrie and Lucas, this issue). By the very metrics of efficacy and efficiency that require universities being run 'like businesses', they have failed abysmally to operate either effectively or efficiently. We contend that the emphasis on running universities as 'businesses' relegates the (statutorily mandated) primary functions of universities to a second place, as exemplified by the precipitous increase of academic casualisation and the concomitant ills of poor conditions, insecure work and wage theft (Lucas 2021c; Lucas and Eltham 2021).

After all, the bases of all sound decision-making are clear understanding and experience. Yet, it is hard to comprehend how governance arrangements that, *contra* the recommendations of both Bologna's *Magna Charta Universitatum* (1988) and UNESCO (1997), favour the appointment of Council members without adequate professional expertise are the *most effective* way to ensure the most appropriate academic (as well as economic) decisions are made. The results are multifaceted and often antithetical to long-standing academic traditions. For example, the application of a 'business mindset' is likely to emphasise the 'CEO-like' functions of Vice-Chancellors at the expense of their role as Academic President or Principal, a more traditionally 'first among equals' role.

As Michael Tomlinson suggests, it is highly likely that external Council members 'characteristically feel they know little about higher education quality, and so will defer to management on these matters' (2021), at the expense of the collective knowledge traditionally expressed by the academic collegium in the majority of the world's tertiary education systems. Equally, the widespread use of quantitative performance metrics (sometime mandated by external regulatory bodies such as TEQSA) to determine the effectiveness of a university may be misleading when cast against the primary functions to be performed by a public university (Moore 1995). Against the expectations common within the private sector, in the case of *public* universities financial sustainability is certainly a necessity, but a very poor indicator of any successful performance against the legislated functions of advancing higher education and research.

At the heart of these issues is the difficulty to assess the ‘best interest of the university’, a phrase interpreted radically differently by different Council members, with the result that such ‘best interests’ are often construed on the basis of imaginary (primarily commercial) stakeholders. The *Higher Education Act (2005)* (Cth) requires that university Council members have an ‘appreciation of the values of a university’, while the Australian Institute of Company Directors recognises, in ‘Principle 3: Board composition’, that directors should be appointed ‘in alignment with the purpose and strategy’ of the organisation concerned (AICD 2019). The current dominance of governing bodies by members without substantial professional experience in higher education and without close connections to the tertiary sector is inherently and inevitably bound to reduce the governing bodies’ ability to fully act ‘in the best interest of the universities’ as required by statutory mandates.

Furthermore, universities operate as quasi-market not-for-profit organisations. As a result of their enabling legislation, they do not have a body corporate comprised of controlling owners/shareholders. The result is that current structures are not fully capable of holding university governing bodies to account. Whereas in the case of registered companies’ boards of directors are directly accountable to the company shareholders, the lack of clearly established ‘shareholders’ in public universities shifts the focus onto a much broader collection of ‘stakeholders’, arguably including the government, students, their parents, the business community, and society at large. As a result, such a wide and diffuse stakeholder group has, *de facto*, no effective mechanism or cohesiveness to effectively hold university governing bodies to account. Consequently, these bodies are not effectively accountable to either the members of the universities they govern (as these members are effectively removed from most – if not all – decision-making processes), or to the general tax-paying public that originally established universities as public statutory bodies with public functions. Moreover, the appointment protocols of Council members are such that the majority of appointments are made (either directly, or indirectly via the mechanism of providing suggestions to the relevant appointing Minister/government, who very seldom departs from such suggestions) by the governing bodies themselves. This creates a *de facto* autocratic loop, an inherently self-perpetuating oligarchy that further diminishes overall accountability.

## Conclusion

Given the large annual revenues of our universities and the massive public investment that supports their operation, there is no doubt that university management requires appropriate financial skills. Equally, universities also greatly benefit from close connections to the

communities (and the broader society) they serve, through the inclusion of members who represent those interests on their governing bodies. University strategy, decision-making, management oversight and risk management can, and do, greatly benefit from the views and expertise of external Council members with significant distance from the university and the higher-education sector. However, the utter preponderance of such expertise has come at the expense of the professional expertise and experience required to further the distinctive goals and functions for which universities have been legally constituted. Moreover, years of reforms to the Australian higher education sector have shifted the focus of tertiary institutions from equipping young adults with the skills necessary for the pursuit of knowledge and the advancement of society to a product to be traded on the open market. The result is the crisis that universities are now facing, a crisis exposed by COVID-19 but that was, in fact, many years in the making.

We acknowledge that the historical justification for the narrative that equates universities with ‘businesses’ is inherently and inextricably linked to the progressive reduction of public funding for the tertiary sector. However, the problems currently faced by Australian universities can be directly connected to the unique features of a governance system that inhabits a liminal terrain. That terrain not only does not mirror the corporate sector it aspires to emulate, but also it is clearly failing to fulfil its public functions as enshrined in existing statutory mandates.

In conclusion, we contend that the main problem facing Australia’s public universities today is not a lack of revenue, nor is it a lack of disposable assets to withstand the crisis engendered by the current pandemic (cf. Guthrie and Lucas, this issue). Rather, the main problem is a governance regime that, together with an overall lack of transparency and accountability, has progressively reduced the ability to fulfil the statutory mandates (and century-old purposes) of universities (Cahill 2020; Lucas and Eltham 2021; Guthrie 2021; Lucas 2021b, 2021c). Therefore, these two issues must be located at the centre of any attempt to reform (or re-form) the Australian higher education system.

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2. Dawkins (1987, 1988) and other papers and reviews continue to nod toWith the exception of the Australian National University, where the legal duties imposed on members of ANU's governing body (its Council) are not found in the university's enabling legislation but in associated general legislation, the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (Cth).
3. The staggering lack of professional tertiary expertise on the part of the majority of Council members is not a reflection of any individual's proclivities. Indeed, in the experience of many of the authors, fellow Council members are committed individuals who dedicate their (often, although not always, free) time to a cause they believe in. However, Council members, however motivated, skilled, committed and astute they may be, the data indicate, simply have no *professional expertise* in the sector they govern.
4. It is worth noting that it is the radical and almost militant nature of the discourse to be here under scrutiny, not the suggestion that some degree of financial acumen is needed to run universities.

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## Notes:

\* This article has been written in dialogue with – and in connection to – all other themed articles within this special issue. As a result, it is best read as part of the issue as a whole.

1. The only public university not established by special statute is the Australian Catholic University (ACU), which was incorporated under the general incorporation legislation, *Companies (Victoria) Code*; incorporated as a company limited by guarantee. Note the *Companies (Victoria) Code* has been repealed and is now part of the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth) and recognised by special statute as a public university; See *Australian Catholic University Act 1990* (NSW); *Australian Catholic University (Queensland) Act 2007* (Qld); *Australian Catholic University (Victoria) Act 1991* (Vic).

# How we got here: The transformation of Australian public universities into for-profit corporations\*

JAMES GUTHRIE AND ADAM LUCAS

*The application of New Public Management (NPM) approaches throughout the Australian higher education system (AHES) over the last thirty years has radically altered the ways in which tertiary education is administered and governed. We explore the ensuing crisis in the AHES through a focus on 'commercial business models' adopted by vice-chancellors and university governing bodies. We argue these models are premised on university executives acting as 'information gatekeepers' whereby most of the data about institutional operations are withheld from external (and especially public) scrutiny. Public accountability with respect to these neoliberal changes has been rendered problematic as the result of legislative changes to the governance clauses of universities. We consider the broader economic and cultural focus of NPM as calculative and commodifying practices that are constructed to be largely impervious to public evaluation. These regressive changes have legitimated by reducing the oversight of staff and student representatives on university governing bodies.*

**KEYWORDS:** New Public Management, Australian universities, public accountability, financial transparency, democratic governance.

## Introduction

Contemporary Australian public universities are managed like big commercial businesses. As vice-chancellors earn millions and students are herded through their degrees like cash cows, casualisation, job insecurity and wage theft for academic and professional staff are both rampant and pervasive. Increasingly expensive degrees leave local and international students with decades of debt. During what can only be described as a crisis in Australian public universities, we aim to explore: how did we get here?

The already limited democratic processes in our public universities have been systematically eroded since the so-called 'Dawkins reforms' of the early 1990s (Lake et al. this issue). State and federal legislative amendments have substituted elected staff and student representatives on university governing bodies for appointed business elites (Lucas and Pelizzon 2021; Pelizzon et al. this issue). This has resulted in universities being increasingly regarded as job factories rather than places of knowledge creation that contribute to the enrichment of the cultures and economies in which they are located. We submit that universities must be both democratically accountable and democratically governed

if they are to fulfil their roles as institutions serving the public good.

This paper explores how higher education in Australia has been transformed into a dysfunctional public-private hybrid since the imposition of neoliberal forms of governance and the widespread introduction of new public management (NPM) practices. It attempts to synthesise five decades of critical research and experience regarding higher education to argue that the largely negative changes that have occurred during this period are antithetical to the purported goals of the education system. They are also corrosive of professional ethical standards, undermine efforts to inculcate in students a sense of social and environmental responsibility, and fail to meet the increasingly challenging demands of complex, rapidly changing societies in the 21st century.

As one of the more pernicious manifestations of neoliberalism, NPM practices have been primarily implemented through the corporatisation of university managerial cultures. Its ideological goal has been to reduce the autonomy of academics and professional staff to exercise their judgment and expertise, while

concentrating power in a largely unaccountable and increasingly authoritarian clique of senior managers and university executives who act as ‘information gatekeepers’ (Tregear et al. this issue).

We position the Australian higher education system (AHES) in its historical and socio-political context by examining the system through the lens of finance, accounting and associated calculative practices. This is achieved in three parts. The first part briefly outlines the introduction of NPM in the AHES over the last three decades. The second part explores public universities’ finances using a ‘rhetoric versus reality’ framework. The third part provides a case study of a journey through public universities over the past five decades, adopting a methodology known as autoethnography. We conclude by pointing to democratic models of governance that continue to persist at many European universities and offer a four-part diagnosis of how to reform the AHES, whereby the core academic principles of academic freedom, collegiality and critical engagement can be reinvigorated.

### New Public Management and Australian public universities

Neoliberalism<sup>1</sup> and its handmaiden NPM rely on privatisation, deregulation, financialisation and globalisation as their processual tools. According to neoliberal philosophy, ‘free markets’ are the best guarantee of economic prosperity and human freedom, whereby private sector managerial values, structures and processes are imposed as disciplinary measures on inefficient public services and a bloated and unresponsive public sector (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Key elements include a shift from professional to executive power, focusing on performance measured by quantitative targets, and the widespread use of financial incentives and numerical forms of performance assessment (Parker et al. 2022, forthcoming). In this context, the purpose of the public university has shifted from the education of elites and professions to the provision of marketable skills and research outputs for the ‘knowledge economy’ and commercial application (Lake et al. this issue).

The multiple contemporary crises in higher education in Australia have their origins in this economic, social and political transformation informed by neoliberal ideology. The idea of a self-governing and independent public university safeguarding its academic freedoms belongs to a bygone era (Martin-Sardesai et al. 2021). Many public universities have become academies of mass production: ‘knowledge factories’ informed by the same logic of productivity and performativity that supposedly contributes to the success of capitalist enterprises (Parker et al. 2022 forthcoming).

The ‘accountingisation’ and ‘audit society’ described by Power (1997) requires the continuous measurement of the performance of academic and operational workers, which is then used to assess the ‘quality’ of university teaching and research (Martin-Sardesai et al. 2017).<sup>2</sup> Beyond the constant anxiety of one’s entire career hanging in the balance over barely attainable performance standards and the threat of dismissal if one does not meet those standards (Baum et al. this issue), the academic profession’s sustainability is at stake (Martin-Sardesai et al. 2021; Vodeb et al. this issue).

The transformation of the AHES has taken place over the past four decades, with various Australian governments systematically restructuring universities according to NPM principles (Parker et al. 2022 forthcoming). The post-1980s public university model as a corporate enterprise (Shore and Wright 2017) emerged from the introduction of market mechanisms that embody neoliberal higher education policies. In Australia, these policies focused on generating university income from international student fees and reducing federal government higher education funding (Connell 2020). Before the ‘Dawkins reforms’ in the 1980s, approximately 80% of university funding was provided by the Federal Government. In 2019, that figure had reduced to about one-third (Babones 2021).

Vice-chancellors and senior management in public universities have subsequently shifted focus from quality teaching and research to quantitative measures of the performance of their academic and professional staff. These changes have been accompanied by competitive quasi-market approaches to student recruitment, intense competition for research grant funding, and a decisive shift to commercial business expectations concerning universities’ contributions to society (Martin-Sardesai et al. 2021).

Consistent with NPM accounting, auditing and accountability practices (Guthrie et al. 1998), such neoliberal ideas have seen public universities focused on their financial performance. Property development, investments, and commercially oriented research income have become their core business and are routinely prioritised over providing quality teaching and research for knowledge production. Organisational behaviour is engineered through ‘strategic goals and targets’ and other measurement procedures. The tools employed to achieve these ends – such as economic and accounting calculations and audit logic – are the same as those used by the Big Four accountancy firms (Ernst and Young, Deloitte, KPMG and PWC), (Shore and Wright 2015). These firms provide consultancy advice to Australian university executives and government, and their members are routinely appointed to university governing bodies. In

aligning their behaviour with the Big Four management ideals, public universities have become champions of the NPM principles of efficiency, commensurability, and 'accountability' (as narrowly determined by them) (Brooks 2018; Andrew et al. 2020). However, critics rightly ask who benefits from these outcomes (Carnegie et al. 2022 a,b)? This question has become even more critical given the COVID-19 pandemic as universities have become subject to marketisation and are now operated as commercial businesses reliant on international student fees to generate free cash flow (Babones 2021).

In Australia, governments emphasise universities' ability to contribute to the 'knowledge economy' by producing employable graduates and research culminating in commercial innovations and patent income (Parker 2020). Federal and state governments attempt to achieve this through regulatory legislation and budgetary policies, given that they are politically and financially responsible for universities.<sup>3</sup> Neoliberal techniques for controlling universities facilitate 'governance at a distance' while at the same time effectively intensifying central control by the government. Universities have now introduced highly centralised management systems that are increasingly opaque to either internal or external scrutiny (Carnegie et al. 2022a). These forms of (non-)accountability arguably contradict the model of universities as autonomous democratic and cultural institutions (Hil et al. this issue).

These trends have culminated from 2010 to 2021 in higher education becoming a significant export earner for Australia, taking third place on the list of Australia's largest export industries. Over the last decade, 40% of annual student revenue in the AHES was derived from international students (Mitchell Institute 2020). In 2019, Australia's universities educated 399,000 international students: almost as many students as were enrolled in the whole sector in 1989. During this period, federal governments have also introduced and then abandoned several different 'quality assurance' systems. This has included a new, demand-driven placement system for domestic students, and most recently the Job-Ready Graduates Program, which has seen fees for domestic students increase significantly and research funding decline by \$4.7 billion annually (Lucas 2021 a,b). As of 2021, the average student contribution to course-related revenue was increased from 42% to 48%, while assistance from the Federal Government has been reduced from 58% to 52% (Lucas 2021 a,b).

### Australian public university finances: smoke and mirrors

Since the early 1990s, vice-chancellors have been incentivised to treat Australian public universities as commercial businesses at the instigation of federal

education ministers and changes to state and federal legislation. Their business models have relied on growing international student numbers and fees to fund operations, research and infrastructure. This goal has had everything to do with generating income and little to do with quality education.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, predictions of significant reductions in international student fees soon followed. Media reports from mid-2020 projected an overall sector-wide revenue decline of \$4.8 billion in 2020: the actual results showed a decrease of \$1.9 billion, or 5.1 % compared with 2019. Thus, we can see how, in 2020, when the pandemic hit, the drop in international student income was portrayed by the university lobby, vice-chancellors and many commentators as a significant financial crisis. This drop in international student revenue continues. However, it has become a smokescreen for other, more fundamental problems with the way the AHES engages with its workforce, the economy and broader society. We now know that at least 40,000 university employees lost their jobs between May 2020 and May 2021: more than any other non-agricultural sector in the Australian economy (Littleton and Stanford 2021). In 2021, we heard virtually nothing from either major political party about the level of job losses in the AHES.

The following Table 1 summarises 2019 and 2020 revenue for the public sector universities in Australia based on federal government data. Total revenue for the sector in 2020 was \$34.6 billion, down from \$36.5 billion in 2019 and \$38 billion in 2018. A reduction in investment revenue was the primary driver of revenue decline across the sector, with a total investment income of \$927.4 million reported in 2020, down \$1.3 billion or 57.7 % from 2019.

In reviewing revenue, we can see that Australian government grants did not keep up with inflation for 2020. Furthermore, local student fees increased; also note the accounting trick of adding together government funding and student tuition fees and calling this 'Australian government financial assistance'.<sup>4</sup>

The current financial strength of the public higher education sector and most individual universities can be judged partly by the accounting numbers.<sup>5</sup> Short-term actions and tactical responses currently in play have mainly focused on cutting academic and operational workers' costs (the latter are generally referred to as 'professional staff' in union negotiations). Each year, the financial reports issued by universities confuse rather than explicate their financial position (Carnegie et al. 2022 a, b). Required statements for public sector universities are the income statement, comprehensive income, statement of financial position, statement of

changes in equity and the statement of cash flows. All except the statement of cash flows are used by individual universities to obscure the flow of funds, as they require an accrual accounting calculative practice (Guthrie 1998). This enables universities to depreciate and amortise the value of assets they have received for free via government grants, philanthropic gifts and bequests against their cash income, making their financial positions look worse than were they required to only report cash in and cash out.

Universities receive money from the Australian Government in the form of financial assistance grants, domestic student fees paid by income-contingent loans, research and consulting income from government and industry, fees paid by international students, research commercialisation, and a range of commercially oriented business ventures.

In 2020, the amount of money flowing to Australian public sector universities was about \$34.6 billion (see Table 1). Ten universities had revenues above \$1 billion. Several had annual revenues over \$2 billion, along with substantial net asset holdings, and consequently show signs of operating as financial corporations. The financial position of universities remained strong throughout the 2020 reporting period, with net assets of \$62.7 billion reported across the sector as of 31 December 2020, up 1.9% from \$61.6 billion in 2019. Total assets across the sector were \$95.0 billion as of 31 December 2020,

increasing from \$90.4 billion in 2019. Property, plant, and equipment represented the most prominent component at \$58.5 billion, followed by investments at \$18.2 billion. In 2020, two of the wealthiest institutions, the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney, reported net assets at \$6.9 billion and \$4.9 billion respectively (Howard 2021). The management of several universities' financial assets is outsourced to investment bankers. However, unlike public companies, there are substantial gaps in their financial reporting, as will be outlined in further detail below.

### The rhetoric and reality of public university finances

Based on the publicly available data above,<sup>6</sup> we turn now to the gulf between the rhetoric of university vice-chancellors concerning their supposedly parlous financial positions, which require them to impose ever more draconian forms of austerity on their institutions, and the reality of Australian public universities as experienced by their staff and students (cf. Tregeear et al. this issue).

The first gap between rhetoric and reality is the oft-repeated claim that universities' financial positions are poor. As was intimated in the previous section, while the rhetoric relies on claims of a loss of income due to the pandemic, the reality is that in 2020, after paying all operating costs, including employee wages and salaries, total cash flows from operating activities show surplus cash from ongoing

**Table 1: Summary of 2019 and 2020 Revenue**

Operating Revenue	2020	2019	Change	
	\$'000	\$'000	\$'000	%
Australian Government Grants	12,122,312	11,976,440	145,872	1.2%
HELP Payments	6,063,971	5,806,178	257,793	4.4%
<b>Australian Government Financial Assistance</b>	<b>18,186,283</b>	<b>17,782,618</b>	<b>403,665</b>	<b>2.3%</b>
State and Local Government Financial Assistance	763,738	725,351	38,387	5.3%
Upfront Student Contributions	455,532	459,066	(3,534)	-0.8%
International Student Fees	9,222,983	9,978,794	(755,811)	-7.6%
Other Fees and Charges	1,454,207	1,814,300	(360,093)	-19.8%
Investment Revenue	927,414	2,191,312	(1,263,898)	-57.7%
Consultancy and Contracts	1,628,787	1,567,755	61,032	3.9%
Other Income *	2,012,149	2,000,053	12,096	0.6%
<b>Total Revenues from Continuing Operations</b>	<b>34,651,093</b>	<b>36,519,249</b>	<b>(1,868,156)</b>	<b>-5.1%</b>

\* Other income includes royalties, trademarks and licenses and the share of net results from associates and joint ventures, accounted for using the equity method.

operational income (e.g. government funds, student fees and investment income). All universities were in funds surplus with the government at the end of 2020, with students paying cash, and operating activities (excluding accruals) also paid in cash to suppliers and employees.

The second gap between rhetoric and reality is that only 17,000 employees lost their jobs in 2020. The fact is that 40,000 or more academics and operational workers have lost their employment, at least 35,000 of whom were employed in public universities (Littleton and Stanford 2021). Analysis of how universities account for the numbers of their employees highlights their inconsistent disclosures (Guthrie 2021 a,b and c)). Nearly all universities are registered as charities in their state or territory and should be treated as public organisations for staffing and financial disclosure rules. This issue of accounting for employees is also relevant in determining how many people have lost employment in Australian public universities since the pandemic: universities have been trying to hide these numbers, especially for casuals (Guthrie 2021a).

The third gap between rhetoric and reality is that the decline in international student revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic forced universities to cut staff, programs and working conditions. The fact is that universities are using an unusual form of accounting called 'underlying operating results' in their annual reports and public disclosures. This is not an accounting statement for legal reporting, but one used to justify the 'rationalisation' of internal structures, staff terminations, and the axing of programs and subjects. These accrual financial statements use business accounting principles that should not apply in public sector organisations like universities. Accrual numbers can be manipulated by recognising depreciation and other accrued expenses (Guthrie 1998). Universities should be required to report cash in and cash out as the primary basis for annual reports of their financial health.

The fourth gap between rhetoric and reality is the claim that public sector universities should be run like commercial businesses, or are commercial businesses, when they are, on the contrary, registered under the *Charities Act* and are therefore not-for-profit organisations. Although Australian public universities are being run like commercial businesses, this fictional status (aided and abetted by both major political parties) has enabled them to hide behind so-called 'commercial-in-confidence' provisions to escape internal and external scrutiny. For example, the University of Melbourne is attempting to use 'commercial-in-confidence' to conceal from the public details of its \$4.9 billion property holdings by challenging in the Federal Court a ruling by the Victorian Information

Commissioner that it must reveal those details as a charitable organisation. As was noted in the previous section, public sector universities hold significant cash and investment portfolios. There has been considerable growth in cash holdings and investments reported by most universities over decades. They collectively held total cash and investments of \$24.6 billion in 2020, up 9.8 % from \$22.4 billion in 2019. The University of Melbourne held \$3.5 billion in cash and investments at the end of 2020 but used the pandemic as an excuse to sack hundreds of permanent and casual staff (Guthrie 2021a).

Most of the financial assets accumulated by Australian universities over the last few decades are the result of cash surpluses from past activities. However, any income from these investments appears to be ring-fenced from operating activity. Consequently, we can only assume that this income goes back into further investments. We submit that such activity makes public universities look more like finance businesses than educational institutions. They have invested their operating surpluses in derivatives, currency swaps, cash holdings and marketable shares (Guthrie 2021a). For example, the Australian National University's (ANU) financial statement for 2020 notes financial assets in primary shares and other financial instruments totalling about \$1.7 billion (Guthrie 2021b).

The fifth gap between rhetoric and reality is that universities' land and buildings are valued at a 'fair market value' of about \$50 billion in 2020. The reality is that most of this property was gifted to universities by state and federal governments. Consequently, the accrual depreciation of these assets makes little sense in this context. There was a 4.9% increase in the value of property, plant and equipment across the sector in 2020. This was driven by recognising service concession assets (read 'public-private partnerships' for building student accommodation and commercial property) following the introduction of new accounting standards. Payments for property, plant and equipment were \$3.3 billion in 2020, down 27.5% from \$4.5 billion in 2019. Many universities continue to undertake significant infrastructure development at the cost of many billions of dollars. Public universities should not be permitted to use the cost depreciation of assets acquired for free to justify cutting staff, programs and subjects. Nor should they be permitted to spend vast sums of money on infrastructure at the expense of their core business of teaching and research.

The sixth gap between rhetoric and reality is that employee expenses are too high. The reality is that the critical assets of public universities are their people, who research, teach and provide operational support for staff and students. Employee expenses cost universities \$19.2 billion in 2020, excluding payroll tax. This represented

a substantial increase of 5.4% over the \$18.2 billion reported in 2019 and was driven almost exclusively by termination payments made to staff. A Senate Select Committee on Job Security (2021: 161) has painted a picture of the university sector as ‘dominated by insecure work and exploitation’. These staff usually find they must do more hours of work than those for which they are paid (Lucas and Eltham 2021; Baum et al. this issue). Wage theft is widespread throughout the sector, with several universities already paying back tens of millions in wages and several others still under investigation (Cahill 2020; Senate Select Committee 2021). However, employee expenses are not the most significant growth in expenses in universities over the past decade. On the contrary, universities’ most considerable growth in expenses has been senior executive salaries, consulting fees, marketing, commission agents, service provider fees, and the outsourcing of university activities to commercial providers (Guthrie et al. 2021).

The seventh gap between rhetoric and reality is that vice-chancellors and university councils provide reliable and audited accounting numbers. The reality is that their public disclosures tend to confuse and conflate different types of accounting numbers. They are also ring-fencing other revenue from their operating activities, for example, investment and commercial income. Most of the funds for these investments and commercial businesses would have been originally sourced from excess government grants and student fees including the HELP/HECS loan scheme to educate students.

### **An autoethnography: the university transformed**

In this section we provide an autoethnography for a fictional person ‘Smith’, who is an amalgam of academics who began her academic career in the early 1980s, and who was fortunate enough to begin her free university education during the years of the Whitlam Labor Government from 1972 to 1975. Smith’s extended journey through the AHES provides an illuminating history of how radically the sector has changed over the last five decades.

In the early 1970s, the primary purposes of universities and colleges of advanced education was to produce local undergraduates and postgraduates. Soon after it was elected in 1972, the Whitlam Government took over the funding of public universities from the states and made it a federal responsibility. Apart from providing undergraduate education for free, it also provided for the first time a living wage for students to complete their studies. There were no international students at Smith’s university, and student numbers in lectures, workshops and tutorials were small. It was not until the early 1980s, when she moved to the ‘Big Smoke’, that she noticed the impact of neoliberalism

and NPM practices in the AHES. As a postgraduate, she observed the effects on staff and students of what was to become an unending series of policy reforms premised on neoliberal ideas under another Labor Government, this time led by Bob Hawke.

The so-called ‘Dawkins reforms’ of the AHES, instituted during the final years of the Hawke Government, ushered in sweeping changes that spanned management structures, pricing, the devolution of budgets, auditing mechanisms, reporting systems and more. In the best traditions of neoliberalism, this was all done in the name of improving service delivery, efficiency, and effectiveness (Guthrie and Parker 1990; Martin-Sardesai and Guthrie 2021). Further changes to administrative practices were legislated. These policies saw performance indicators, competition between sectors and programs, and program budgeting focused on outputs rather than inputs (Martin-Sardesai et al. 2021). They also saw the emergence of business accounting for public sector organisations, as well as accrual-based accounting and the requirements that public universities produce business accounting statements in their annual reports (Guthrie and Cameron 1993).

In the early 1990s, soon after she secured her first tenured academic position, Smith noticed a significant change in student demographics, including many international students and larger class sizes. There were now 600 students in one of her lecture theatres. At the same time, contact with students per subject was reduced from five to three hours. In 1995, she was offered a tenured position at a graduate school, where she stayed for a decade. This was an enlightening experience as the community of academics had to work together not as a siloed discipline but as a group of teachers and researchers to provide life-changing postgraduate experiences for engaged students.

Smith also noticed a significant shift from academic objectives to financial management during this time. The number of publications she produced now defined her research performance, regardless of their quality or the amount of work she put into producing them. She noticed the Federal Government’s introduction of a neoliberal technique associated with NPM and the audit culture which radically changed how the research performance of academics was assessed (Martin-Sardesai et al. 2017). It involved the introduction of a performance measurement that rated disciplines from five to one compared to what were described as ‘world-class’ standards. Strangely, there was no funding attached to this new kind of performance measurement, even though it had significant internal ramifications for academics regarding teaching, research grants, promotion, and sabbatical (Martin-Sardesai et al. 2019).

In the late 1990s, Smith was alarmed to see that several of her academic colleagues were sacked by management on the grounds that they had not brought in sufficient student income from their teaching, or funding from their research. They were classified as ‘dead wood’ and lopped off: tenure had been abolished by stealth. At the same time, new metrics were introduced that supposedly represented the total cost of degrees.<sup>7</sup> These costs were then levied on international students, most of whom were postgraduates, which then became a significant source of discretionary funding for universities (Carnegie et al. 2022a). Federal Government control of undergraduate student numbers and government funding in terms of financial support per student was further reduced in the name of ‘efficiency gains’. Smith watched with dismay as she and her colleagues were obliged to teach ever larger classes for both lectures and tutorials. She was recently told that AHES student-staff ratios and class sizes are now among the highest in the world (Times Higher Education Survey 2021).

The ‘rationalisation’ continued apace throughout the early 2000s and beyond. Internally, faculty-level budgets were devolved to ‘cost units’ or ‘centres’. Revenue from teaching was used to cover a unit’s salary costs, and the rest was contributed to ‘central’ to cover physical facilities, library, IT services, general administration and the salaries of senior management and executives, and for investments. The graduate school at which Smith worked paid about 20% to the ‘centre’ in early 2020, whilst her colleagues at the Business School witnessed about 75% of their teaching fees directed to the ‘centre’ in 2017.<sup>8</sup> Secretly, Smith thought this was poetic justice, as it was this business school and others throughout the country that had been cheerleaders for NPM and neoliberal ideology since the early 1980s.

In 2004, Smith was offered a professorship at a prestigious city university. Her salary was geared to her research performance, which had in turn to be aligned with the ‘strategic goals’ and ‘research priorities’ of her department and faculty but were actually decided at the university level (Martin-Sardesai et al. 2017). She and her colleagues were discouraged from thinking of themselves as a collective of academic citizens and encouraged to focus on their own self-interest. Insufficient attention to this admonition would lead to termination of employment. Permanent performance monitoring and the commodification of her labour-power were the price of compliance (Gray et al. 2002). After all, she was told, who could possibly object to such a benign incentive to work harder, especially since it was all about improving her university’s global rankings and reputation (Martin-Sardesai et al. 2021)?

Having witnessed the early retirement and sacking of several of her colleagues under this performance-based

regime, Smith decided she had had enough and took the option of early retirement. She was fortunate in gaining a fractional position at a European university for the next decade. The sensible Europeans had not adopted neoliberalism nor the NPM practices that went with it. University education in her adopted country was free. The vice-chancellor (rector) was elected from the ranks of academics and operational support staff (see Vodeb et al. this issue). The election campaign for rectors ran publicly for several months, with candidates presenting their vision for the university in forums, round tables, and the media. The candidates spoke not only to the academic community but also to members of society – because, after all, knowledge and the university are a public value and a public good. Smith was both surprised and pleased to see that deans and department chairs were also elected in a transparent, democratic process (cf. AAUP 2020).

## Conclusion

Australian public universities are no longer serving public interest criteria. Nor are they focused any longer on their core teaching and research activities. They have become dysfunctional public-private hybrids that have pretensions to be for-profit corporations but lack all the checks and balances on executive power that ensure their leadership is accountable. Vice-chancellors use their interpretations of the financial results to paint a picture of ill financial health and a crisis in tertiary education that can only be resolved through increased public funding or cuts to staff and programs. A realistic assessment of the financial health of public sector universities that examines underlying trends, threats and opportunities over an extended period shows that most public sector universities are doing well. Nevertheless, despite their essential role in society – and their growing financial significance – financial accountability and transparency are almost entirely absent.

We have identified several transparency issues that can be dealt with in the short term. First, the nationally consistent, full disclosure of employment data and the cost of executive salaries. Second, the reporting of university funding allocations and university budgets based on cash flow should be publicly available and in a format that the public can easily understand. Annual accrual financial statements do nothing for transparency. It is neither in universities nor the public’s interest for university executives to be empowered as ‘information gatekeepers’. Third, university councils should include equal representation for staff and students and not be dominated by business elites (Pelizzon et al. this issue). Fourth, the performance management systems that surveil academics and construct a notion of performance in line with senior executive strategies need to be recognised for their negative impact on research and teaching quality, as well as academic freedom and privacy.

While the administrative elites at universities have grown, the academic profession has been reduced and casualised (Pelizzon et al. 2021; Lucas and Pelizzon 2021). Throughout our academic and professional careers, we have both experienced this transition. Guthrie started as one of a collective of scholars and became an individual unit of production in the university machine. Lucas began his academic career as a casual tutor and lecturer in the early 1990s but could not secure a full-time lecturing position until 2008 and has subsequently been subjected to six rounds of 'change management'. Lost in the corporatisation of the AHES is the notion of intellectual citizenship and the idea that an academic career is something of which one can be proud because of its contribution to enriching society. Nevertheless, we are both convinced that change for the better is not only possible but necessary if Australia's public universities are to fulfil their social obligations to its citizens and the wider world.

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- Notes:**
- \* This article has been written in dialogue with – and in connection to – all other themed articles within this special issue. As a result, it is best read as part of the issue as a whole.
1. These measures echo the broader set of global trends advocated in the Milton Friedman and Chicago School-brand of neoliberal economics (Shore and Wright 2015). This school of thought saw radical experiments in Chilean public sector universities in the 1980s, removing direct grants to universities from the state and only funding teaching through student tuition fees. To pay for their education, students could take out a government loan. This happened directly after the US-backed military coup d'état on 11 September 1973.
2. We note that the performance measurement targets set by deans and vice-chancellors have become increasingly unrealistic. For example, Martin-Sardesai et al. (2021) note that one business school is using ABDC, Scopus, Scimago and Quartile classifications for performance expectations:
- full professors are required to annually attain targets such as five-figure research grant income, one to two PhD students graduated per year, and four A-A\*/4-4\* ranked journal articles published per year ... One performance standard in a 2019 issued business school document reveals that a Professor (Level E) is required to win \$40,000 of grant income per year, graduate one PhD student per year and publish four C1 articles per year, three of which must be in Quartile 1. Another university has been reported in the press for taking its academics' funding and publishing targets to the extreme – for instance, requiring professors to publish at twice the average annual rate for their field of research. To add to the strain, these targets are often being set in a time where the conventional 40/40/20 teaching/research/administration load is steadily giving way to a 40/30/30 split.
3. University governance within Australia has been shaped by various factors, including changes to legislation regarding the structure and functions of university governing bodies and the sources of funding for universities. State Acts of Parliament establish various Australian universities and are subsequently amended to reflect the ideological preferences of incumbent governments. These acts regulate aspects of university governance, including their governing bodies' size and composition (councils, senates, boards of trustees). A chancellor is the formal head of a university, working closely with the vice-chancellor and president (Lucas et al. 2020; Pelizzon et al. this issue).
4. Undergraduate students pay for their degree via what was formerly known as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) when first introduced in 1989. Now known by the acronym HELP, the scheme is still commonly referred to as 'HECS' and debts as 'HECS debts'. These student contributions have always covered a substantial proportion of the cost of a public university degree. This can be thought of as a budget saving for government, as the student replaces government contributions to their education with their own contribution via income tax following graduation. Furthermore, the Federal Government does not charge interest but does index the HELP debt.
5. The finance and accounting data was extracted from the DESE (2021) University Finances 2020 Summary Information, 28 October 2021, and associated database. These are the financial results for the sector for 2020. It is noted that individual universities have different results, and we have mainly reported on aggregate data. We do not reference the data in the paper as it comes from DESE (2021).
6. Publicly available data for university finances and staffing is limited to DESE (2021) which uses calculative practices to limit transparency and public scrutiny. State and federal government education departments and individual universities stonewall freedom of information requests about the composition of international students, their institutional costings and research grants, as well as classes of employment and vice-chancellor and senior executive salaries (Babones 2021).
7. The cost of a degree is a very contested concept. The Deloitte Access Economics report on this issue is flawed (Babones 2021). Infrastructure depreciation should not be used in costing as nearly all of this was gifted by governments to public universities.
8. However, many of the inputs counted were shadow prices allocated by the centre in the absence of actual costs. For example, on revenue, Master students from China in one program were charged exorbitant fees. This generated a free cash flow of \$200 million a year for the centre of the university concerned.

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# Australian Public Universities and the Destruction of the Academic Community\*

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*The article investigates the destruction of the academic community at Australian public universities. It does so by analysing the nature of the academic community and academic work, in particular 'the gift of the academic community', and the forces, which work against its values and principles, in particular commodification and managerialism. Based on data from various sources as well as our original research about the major and unprecedented Australian university crisis in 2020/21, we show that deeply ingrained and exceptionally widespread managerialism operates in ways which are by design strategically and explicitly destroying the Australian academic community and the publicness of the university. We conclude by showing three main managerialist extractive strategies: a) outsourcing and consultancies, b) cooptation of academic culture by managerialism and c) branding.*

**KEYWORDS:** Academic community, managerialism, gift economy, extractive strategies, outsourcing and consultancies, branding, cooptation of academic culture.

## **Intro, (or how is it possible that students don't have a clue?)**

A recent discussion with a class of students showed that none of them was aware of what was happening with the universities since the start of COVID-19. Some 40,000 academics and professional staff – around 20% of the university workforce – have lost their jobs (Littleton and Stanford 2021). Full programs, departments and hundreds of courses were closed (Zhou 2020). The Coalition Federal Government led by Scott Morrison has raised tuition fees for humanities and social sciences (Campbell and Johnson 2020) and changed the law three times to ensure that the financial support called "Job Keeper" would not be given to *public* universities, while at the same time millions of dollars have been given to *private* universities (Price 2021). These are developments of historic significance; an unseen assault on Australian universities involving strategic manoeuvres of social engineering that are shaking the foundations of the academic community, and undermining the quality of current and future student education. As it turned out in the conversation, none of the students knew about these dramatic, landscape-changing developments.

The main reason for students' lack of awareness can be found partly in the culture of their media consumption: social media operate as a self-referential

bubble (Pariser 2011). In addition, Australia has one of the most concentrated media ownership systems of any democratic country (Brevini and Ward 2021). Consequently, these *issues of public concern* have not been reported nearly as much as they should have been. Nevertheless, how is it possible that the students we talked to had absolutely no clue about such important matters that directly and crucially affect them? Can the reason be found in the nature of the current academic community?

## **Academic community, the co-construction of knowledge and the shift towards performance**

The situation just described is symptomatic of the whole Australian university sector and in our view suggests that the academic community is being designed in ways where access to information, channels for participation and cultures of collaboration are strictly circumscribed.

The idea of a collaborative academic community can be related to the intensely relational ontology of knowledge. The social nature of knowledge production is inherent to the process itself. Russian social psychologist Lev Vygotsky is one of many scholars who has clearly

demonstrated that thinking has social origins, and that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and participation in a socio-cultural learning setting (Vygotsky 1978). It is the academic community that is crucial for the production and reproduction of knowledge (Connell 2019). The young philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach commented on the Humboldt University in 1826:

There is no question here of drinking, duelling and pleasant communal outings; in no other university can you find such a passion for work, such an interest in things that are not petty student intrigues, such an inclination for the sciences, such calm and such silence. Compared to this temple of work, the other universities appear like public houses (Feuerbach in McLellan 1973: 29).

In this regard, nothing has changed. According to university statutes the key function of the university is: 'the promotion, advancement and transmission of knowledge and research' (*Sydney University Act 1989*). All Australian university acts state a version of such a purpose. How the universities fulfil the key purpose depends on the nature and quality of academic communities.

The academic community consisting of academics, operations workers (transport workers, security workers, administrators, librarians and others) and students is a special type of community. The different actors relate to each other in predefined ways. In the Australian university we can see a different type of stratification than for example in most European universities where education is seen as a human right and university studies are largely free as they are financed by the government. This creates a different relationship between academics, students, and operations workers. In Australia, students enter into a market transaction because at *public universities* students still need to pay tuition. Students who enter into this relationship are commonly seen by university management as lucrative clients while the university is perceived by many students as a service-providing institution. The conflict at the core of such a relationship is caused by the tension created by the enforced market-based transactional relationship. What matters for the management is the calculated relation between input and output, rather than educational outcomes for generations of learners.

In the light of the end of metanarratives, French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard has seen performativity as a key factor legitimising science and knowledge (Lyotard 1984). This logic permeates research as well as teaching. What Lyotard called the "technological criterion" relates now to a broader shift in automation and the 'mercantilization

of knowledge'. To paraphrase Raewyn Connell (2019), through the underpinning principles of performativity, teaching and research is not seen as being done in a truthful way, but in ways that maximise profit in the input/output relation. It is not an exaggeration to call universities performance centres. We don't work anymore, we perform. We don't go to workplaces, but to performance centres. Academic communities are thus transformed into performance networks.

This performativity has a direct impact on knowledge production. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2021) sees a destruction of time-consuming values. Loyalty, commitment, and ritual are being hollowed out, although these are crucial communal values for a functioning academic community. For Byung-Chu1, effectiveness replaces truth and what is key is the short-term effect. This can be seen in the performance management culture of strictly counting and classifying things according to narrow time frames. What counts are only the last 'successes'; history and past academic work does not really matter and flattening and thinning out of our relationalities seems all pervasive:

Today we chase after information, without gaining knowledge. We take note of everything, without gaining insight. We communicate constantly, without participating in a community. We save masses of data, without keeping track of memories. We accumulate friends and followers, without encountering others (Byung-Chul Han 2021: 34).

Performative relationships are dividing students from academics (and operations workers) when it comes to the collective production of knowledge. Such technical performative relations based on market transactions are in principle instrumental and without a deep communal quality.

### **The gift of the academic community vs commodification**

Academics and managers see the pursuit of producing and legitimising knowledge very differently. German sociologist Richard Münch has, in his book *Academic Capitalism: Universities in the Global Struggle for Excellence* (Münch 2013), shown that the principle economy underpinning the academic community is the gift economy, as their members:

[...] strive for progress in scientific knowledge for its own sake just because of their passion for searching the truth. At the same time they offer the scientific community a gift for which they receive recognition. This kind of gift exchange is determined by two taboos: (1) no direct temporal

link between gift and counter-gift; and (2) no calculation of price (Münch 2013: 15).

Lewis Hyde has described two distinct fields separated by a boundary:

A gift, when it moves across the boundary, either stops being a gift or else abolishes the boundary. A commodity can cross the line without any change in its nature; moreover, its exchange will often establish a boundary where none previously existed (as, for example, in the sale of a necessity to a friend) (Hyde 2007: 63).

There is a deep communal logic that is inherent to the gift economy, which is in fact the opposition to the logic of the market economy: ‘It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection’ (Hyde 2007: 58). A gift economy creates communities, and communities that experience an increase of commodity exchange suffer in the process: ‘We can also say, to put the point conversely, that in a group that derives its cohesion from a circulation of gifts the conversion of gifts to commodities will have the effect of fragmenting the group, or even destroying it’ (Hyde 2007: 77).

The commodification of knowledge gifts in academic communities happens on different levels, but a prevailing force pushing away from a culture based on the gift is the professional quantification of work in the form of research and teaching ‘outputs’. Academic culture is constituted on the basis of constant competitive comparisons and stratifications, which underpin working and collegial relations. Such comparisons are based on numeric classifications and rankings, reinforced by awards such as higher salaries and higher status of academics. Professional representatives disguised as academics are honouring the ties between the university and the industry so much that in Australia the universities themselves are called the ‘industry’. The excessive implementation of New Public Management (Hood 1991) by governments, a doctrine officially claiming to ensure, through management, the accountability of public institutions, creates a culture of dictatorial auditing and surveillance:

*Homo academicus* [italics added] is now one of the most measured and audited characters in modern society! In any case, the tidal wave of numbers that track her every movement is based upon a fundamental mistake. As Cris Shore perceptively points out, ‘the problem is that audit confuses “accountability” with “accountancy” so that “being

answerable to the public” is recast in terms of measures of productivity, “economic efficiency” and delivering “value for money” (Fleming 2021: 99).

Research on Australian universities shows that since the radical implementation of New Public Management in the late 1980s, internal managerial self-governance has been significantly strengthened, and at the same time the self-governance of academics has been significantly weakened (Rowlands in Croucher and Woelert 2021; Guthrie and Lucas 2022).

### **Good academic work vs the disintegration of the academic community**

The Good Work Harvard University research project founded by psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, William Damon, and Howard Gardner investigated the meaning of good work for more than two decades. Its findings conclude that: ‘If the fundamentals of good work-excellence and ethics are in harmony, we lead a personally fulfilling and socially rewarded life. If they are not, either the individual or the community, or both, will suffer’ (Gardner et al. 2001: 16).

Communities are associated with gifts and with being obliged to others because of their bonding power (Mauss 2002). Commodity exchange is by nature detached and is associated with alienation and freedom (Hyde 2007: 69). According to the Good Work project a key condition for good work is that it has to be excellent in quality, ethical and meaningful for the practitioner (Gardner et al. 2001). The key to meaningful academic work is participation in a strong academic community, which operates under academic principles. More than this, meaningful work goes beyond the personal interest as it aims to fulfil a greater goal (Frankl 2006). This is, as we will see, especially important in the light of academics’ motivation to do good for others and society.

Research about the job satisfaction of academics shows that Australian academics are largely not satisfied, and that Australian academia is, in fact, among the worst places in the world for academics to work. Coates et al. showed in their study *The Attractiveness of the Australian Academic Profession: A Comparative Analysis* that:

Australian academics ... are less satisfied with their work than international colleagues and possibly other professionals in Australia, ... they report one of the highest propensities for job change ... [either out of the profession or the country] ... [and] one of the lowest levels of satisfaction with institutional management and support (Coates et al. 2009: 29).

An NTEU survey of 7,000 academics conducted in 2015 showed that 46% of academics at the University of

Melbourne feared being made redundant if they did not work overtime. The survey also revealed that academics across the country worked almost 20 million hours of overtime in the previous year, which translates to some 4,000 full-time positions (Bagshaw 2015).

The job dissatisfaction of academics has been rising since the early 1990s, which coincides with the rise of the nationwide implementation of instrumental performance management. Researchers are reporting about staff being at 'breaking point' (Lacy and Sheehan in Bentley et al. 2013), and that the majority of academics were at risk of psychological illness due to stress linked to reduced collegial control and autonomy over workloads (Winefield et al. in Bentley et al. 2013; Baum et al. 2022; Tregear et al. 2022). The disintegration of the academic community, the key social entity, which ensures good academic work, is an ongoing process with rising dire consequences. The extent to which academic communities at Australian universities are disintegrated has become even more obvious during the forced restructures in 2020/21.

The Australian public broadcasting corporation reported on the case of the University of Newcastle during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Depending on who you talk to, the University of Newcastle has either started semester two in the midst of a necessary restructure that will 'balance the books', or it is in the 'demoralising' and 'distressing' process of job cuts that are forcing many staff to seek mental health support (Lewis 2021: NP).

The same story goes on to quote Associate Professor Suzanne Ryan who works in the School of Business: 'The decision to cut and restructure and reorganise the university is not one that most of the staff and students understand the rationale [for]' (Lewis 2021: NP).

We should remember that the key purpose of public universities as defined in their university acts is the production of teaching and research. How is it then possible that academics and students do not understand changes, which crucially impact their own academic community? Why did the managers not provide a meaningful rationale? And why don't academics have a say in the restructuring?

The case of the University of Newcastle is one of the very many in the current Australian university landscape that shows the nature of how the disintegration of academic communities has been achieved. Strategies of quantification and marketisation detach, separate, isolate and decontextualise because of their extractive

epistemology. That which has a market value (the academic outputs): 'must be detachable or alienable so that it can be put on the scale and compared. [...] we who do the valuation must be able to stand apart from the thing we are pricing. We have to be able to conceive of separating ourselves from it' (Hyde 2007: 64).

The above examples of enforced restructures and job cuts are an explicit manifestation of the underlying principles installed in Australian universities which are at work every day, although not always explicitly manifested in their entire and full brutal potential. While the managers have cut jobs and restructured our academic communities, and distressed and anxious academic communities could not make sense of it, managers of the universities in New South Wales have spent more money sacking people than they have lost because of lower international student enrolments due to COVID-19-related border closures (Ollivain 2021). At the same time managers claim that lower enrolments caused by COVID-19 are the reason for the sackings.

The extractivist relation between the academic community and executive management is demonstrated by the lack of appreciation of academics and the nature of academic work which the latter habitually and routinely display. Academics, students and operational support staff are being rendered into numbers-based profit centres, which are constantly audited and assessed, while the data extracted is then used to discipline and punish staff and students (Foucault 1977). All of this is directly opposed to the very nature of the academic community. As such, this system, developed by management, actively *excludes* management from the academic community and ensures the separation not only remains in place but increases: this is a crucial point. A member of the academic community receives appreciation as a special gift, the nature of which is not motivated by an interest in *direct remuneration*:

The connection between gift and reciprocity is not motivated by direct interest from either side, but by mutual bonds, gratitude, and obligation. The gift of being included in the scientific and/or academic community produces a feeling of gratitude, bond, and obligation for reciprocity in every one of its members. They feel committed to respond by making their own gifts to the community (Münch 2013: 17).

The gift needs to circulate and the rewards should not be direct as they will in this way erode the ethos of the academic community. A functioning academic community ideally operates without winners and losers. Academic practice requires that these gifts are made for reasons of gratitude and mutual obligation, the aim being the

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production of a collective good. This is possible if the academic ethos is maintained as a key part of the culture of the academic community:

The crucial requirement for the effectiveness of this arrangement is the vitality of the academic and scientific communities and the related disciplinary associations. This includes, first of all, that these communities are present for their members and play an active role in society and in exercising public responsibility (Münch 2013: 19).

The public responsibility of any university depends on the public values of the academic community. Is it possible to maintain public values in Australian universities if the institutions have been transformed to follow an extractive rationality, designed to channel power away from academics, students, and operational support staff? Is it possible to cultivate a fragile, sacred ethic that has underpinned academic culture for centuries if the majority of the leaders of Australian universities, that is, the members of university councils, have no prior experience working in the university sector (Lucas et al. 2020)?

### **Managerialism, the extraction of the academic community and the loss of publicness**

The Humboldt University in Berlin is a famous example of how students and their professors have always been understood to be working *together* to discover new knowledge. Humboldt University is a key institution which signifies the birth of the modern university, where knowledge and academic work was seen as autonomous, its production was not meant to be subsumed to any instrumental goals, and students participated in education to become critical and autonomous citizens. These ideals and the values they embody could not be further from the current dominant streams of the Australian university whose main focus seems to be entrepreneurial and its ethos corporate.

Cary and Watt offer the following classification of 'entrepreneurial' or 'corporate' universities (Cary and Watt 1999):

- The extension of research, teaching, and financial partnerships between universities and corporations;
- The growing financial pressure exerted upon universities [by the state];
- The assimilation of corporate culture by the academic community (e.g. managerial practices, accounting techniques, technocratic rhetoric);
- The design of university curricula and degree programs to service corporate needs;

- The reorientation of scientific research towards corporate demands.

The corporatisation of Australian public universities has a particular quality. A recently published paper using a longitudinal analysis of changes at Australian universities (Croucher and Woelert 2021) has scrutinised changes in staffing profiles over the period 1997 to 2017. The research shows a drastic increase in non-academic management roles (i.e. middle and senior) and at the same time a large decrease in the number of academic support staff:

Over this period, the number of management-level staff at Australian universities rose from 4,970 to 16,629, effectively an increase by a factor of 3.35. By contrast, over the same period, the number of *support staff* roles declined in absolute terms from 17,094 to 7,787, despite the considerable growth in overall staff numbers at all universities occurring over the years (Croucher and Woelert 2021: 11).

Another important observation is the continuing decrease of full time, tenured academics. Former Melbourne University Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis commented for *The Sydney Morning Herald* as: 'What you *don't* do [is] load up the institution with expensive permanent staff, because you know that later this will be a significant problem' (Silvester 2019). Perhaps it is worth remembering again that according to universities' acts, Australia's public universities' core business is to develop and provide research and teaching. As indicated at the beginning of this paper, during 2020/21 we have seen another 40,000 academics lose their jobs, with more slated to be made redundant over the coming months. Lucas opines that:

the COVID pandemic has clearly demonstrated that the business models under which Australian universities currently operate are not sustainable, and have distorted university priorities to such an extent that whole programs and high-performing academics are being targeted for dissolution and redundancy (Lucas 2021: 8).

The New Public Management doctrine (Hood 1991) with its official goal to maximise the productivity of public funding provided to Australian universities is a particularly noxious strain of management called managerialism. This doctrine, which has established itself as the *classical* view of management is 'an approach to management that has at its core the promotion and legitimisation of an economic, market-based rationality for the organisation and its employees' (Halford and Leonard 1999 in Winter 2017). Dictating a unitary perspective, this approach sees management as a top-down relationality, driven

by performance management, standardisation, and managing by numbers. In his book *Managing Academics*, Winter explains this radical approach:

A hierarchy of top-down authority is a distinctive feature of managerialist decision-making in higher education. Executive decisions taken at higher management levels easily bypass collegial (and slower) forms of academic governance ensuring resources (including academics) can be quickly deployed on the basis of student service delivery and cost efficiency imperatives. Limitations on collegial power evident in “hard managerialism” is the abolition of elected rectors and deans in favour of direct appointment by the university executive (Winter 2017: 59).

What Peter Fleming describes as ‘you are on your own but never left alone’ in his book *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (2021), is a parallel system of standardisation based on numeric quantification, audit and surveillance manifesting in a violent form of managerial bureaucracy: ‘[s]preadsheets provide the most objective financial mechanism by which to monitor and evaluate the individual contributions of academic staff over a defined period of time’ (Winter 2017). This is where we have ended up, with governance by spreadsheet.

Australian universities operate under dubious and dangerous doctrines which reduce human relationalities within academic communities to enervating banalities coated in high-end business rhetoric. Academics for public universities have analysed the constellation of the university councils of all Australian public universities. Only 31% of all council members have any prior experience in the university sector (Baum et al. 2021).

Managerialism is not the only way management can be employed. There are other ways to manage and this is a crucial point. Managerialism is the most aggressive, destructive approach of all management approaches because its underlying principles are based on radical extractivism. Winter, for example, grounding his argument in the work of the sociology of professions, puts forward the three key values of the academic profession: pluralism, professionalism and collegiality, in order to show alternative and more collegial ways for managers to encourage collaborative and collegial work settings (Winter 2017: 82). Managerialism is completely disconnected from the nature and aims of *public* universities. Its guiding principle is commodification, which is, as we have shown, the exact opposite of the gift economy on which key principles of academic culture and community are based.

There is a key element that we need to examine in the light of public universities: namely what is called public service motivation and public values. Academics, who traditionally work in public universities, will largely consider their social role differently to those working in the private sector:

[Public service motivation] concerns the individual motivation to do good for others and the society [...] whereas public values encompass the normative ideals in the public sector. Those ideals are deeply embedded in the specific modes of governance found in public organisations, that is, their governmental ownership, funding and control, which define their ‘public-ness’ (Chatelain-Ponroy et al. 2018: 1379).

The same group of researchers have examined the French university system and looked at the relationship between their commitment to performance-based management and public values. This research is highly valid for us because New Public Management is increasingly changing the French public university system that is traditionally very strongly based on public values. The research included university presidents and vice-presidents, deans, department chairs, directors of research units, and academics elected to university boards. The research concluded that: ‘performance-based management conflicts with the commitment to publicness: individuals committed to performance are more in favour of private ownership, funding, and control, i.e., of privatess’ (Chatelain-Ponroy et al. 2018). Positive attitudes towards performance-based management culture with all its tightly knit disciplinary, audit and surveillance systems are negatively correlated with commitment to university publicnesss. Such a management culture imposes private values on public goods, along with all the differentials in wealth and power that neoliberal capitalism inevitably produces (Piketty 2013).

### **Three key extractive strategies destroying the academic community by design**

The extractive designing of academic communities uses concrete strategies to achieve its goal. In our view these three extractive strategies are key:

1. Outsourcing and external consultancies
2. Branding
3. Cooptation of academic culture by managerialism

There is no one single way of designing anything: the design discipline has developed approaches which are democratic and not extractive. Participatory design is a design and research approach, which interestingly originated in the 1970s in Scandinavia in order to design systems which would improve workers’ rights and the very

conditions of work through fostering democracy at the workplace (Spinuzzi 2005). These early researchers used action research, which linked ethnographic methods to positive change for the research participants. Participatory design has immensely evolved in the last fifty years and become a strong sub-discipline of design. It could be applied to design inclusive and democratic communities in line with the ethos of public universities, with students, academics and operational support staff collaborating in the research and design of our institutions. As a continuing process, participatory design could be and should be a key principle for the design of democratised academic communities. From an ontological design perspective, communities practise the design of themselves (Escobar 2018). We design, and design designs us.

### 1. Outsourcing and external management consultancies

Outsourcing and external management consultancies are an explicit and striking example of extractive designing. According to the research done by Academics for Public Universities by analysing publicly available data from university yearly reports, outsourced, external consultancies are among the highest and fastest rising costs of the universities (Guthrie and Lucas. this issue ).

According to an article published by *The Saturday Paper*, private management consultants took over the public service as: "Australia's consulting industry (public and private) is the fourth largest in the world" (Morton 2021). A new discussion paper released by The Australia Institute's Bill Browne this week argues, 'By population, Australia's spending on consulting is greater than that of any other country, and about double that of comparable countries like Canada or Sweden' (Morton 2021).

The excessive spending we can see in the university sector has three main consequences. First is the weakening of the academic community, because the universities should:

- a) use their own available expertise
- b) the massive resources spent on external management consultancies should be rather used on core activities of teaching and research and their support services
- c) this is indeed a weakening of the public service through private management companies and is therefore destructive of the communal.

It is also significant that it is impossible to know the content of most consultancies because this data is not made publicly available.

### 2. Branding

The outsourcing of expertise is directly related to branding as a key extractive design technology and culture. While universities are spending hundreds of millions of dollars annually on external consultants in a non-transparent manner, they are engaged in systematic wage theft from their employees. Just one of the recent cases at the University of Sydney revealed that staff were owed \$12.75m in unpaid wages in 2021 (Campus Morning Mail 2021). While the universities are not using their in-house expertise and are enriching external managerial consultants, they pay millions of dollars to outsource branding services in order to promote the unused expertise of their own academics as being world class in order to attract fee-paying students. The ironies multiply.

Branding operates extractively in relation to students because it creates an impression of high-end education, while the reality is that resources are being taken away from education. The quality of education is declining while branding simultaneously promotes 'quality education' to lure international students into massive debt from some of the world's poorest countries, such as Nepal. University branding operates extractively because it is created by external companies motivated by profit rather than in-house expertise, which would arguably produce better outcomes for students because the level of that expertise is much higher than what most of the advertising and branding agencies can offer (Vodeb 2007) and because academics and students are not participating in the very designing of the branding and the identity it represents. The academic community is also not preoccupied with profiteering from its students. As such, university branding and the marketing of tertiary education are both forms of violence because they *impose* disciplinary regimes on academic values that are fundamentally antithetical to them (Vodeb 2007). Any identity based on extraction is imposed and maintained through measures of discipline and punishment. As such, both activities involve re-designing academic communities based on principles of colonisation. In our observation, the vast majority of academics and students at Australian universities disagree with the branding of their own institutions. Students often think that the branding is out of touch – which it is, because it is envisioned and approved by executive managers who are alienated from the students and academics (Jaeggi 2016; Henning 2015; Zima 2014). University branding also erodes and extracts from the public sphere, because it communicates a distorted and commodified image of an essentially public service. Branding extracts value out of a public sphere and channels it into private bank accounts.

### 3. Cooptating of academic culture by managerialism

When the managers of the University of Sydney were in the process of appointing their new Vice-Chancellor Mark

Scott in early 2021, the academic community protested and expressed strong doubts because the candidate had no PhD, which is a standard academic qualification. How could someone without academic qualifications be the executive head of a university they asked? The university council came up with a creative solution. They gave the candidate the title 'Professor of practice' because of his industry experience. The title was given outside of any academic procedure. Mark Scott was the former CEO of the ABC: his industry experience was therefore just managerial experience. The managers of the University of Sydney therefore gave Mark Scott the *academic title* because of his *managerial industry experience*.

The process of cooptation also works in the opposite direction. What is both fascinating and deeply disconcerting about the current Australian university system is not only the lack of democratic processes (Pelizzon et al. 2022), but also how the managerial culture has taken over the academic culture of researchers and teachers.

A line manager is for example the title given to academics who are required to undertake performance management of their academic colleagues up to three times a year. How is it possible that academics are calling themselves and each other *line managers*? This is Fordist language, which was literally invented to audit assembly-line production processes. Are universities factories? Are academics working on assembly lines? Are academics auditing and managing each other? Why are academics also becoming (small) managers? Another example of such everyday language is the word 'output' which is literally used to describe research publications, while courses taught are called 'units' and are marked with acronyms and numbers like for example DDD60001, while academics often use these codes instead of the title of the course when they talk to each other.

Good management can and should contribute to the academic community. But management has its place. Recent research shows that universities suffer and underperform without a strong balance between research, teaching, and managerial cultures (Münch 2020). Turning everyone into a manager is absurd. The design of an extractive managerial audit culture among researchers and teachers, especially when top managers of public universities are less accountable than managers of corporations, (Beck 2020) is dissolving academic community and academic values.

And finally, we come back to the question that we asked at the start of this paper; why did students not have a clue about the current attacks on public universities? When we openly talked to students and explained that the industry in Australia does not offer as many jobs as there are students enrolled in one particular discipline one student

complained about this in the student feedback. In a one-on-one meeting the department chair who is a manager without a PhD and without one single academic research publication said to the lecturer: 'we are not allowed to tell students such things'.

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#### Notes:

\* This article has been written in dialogue with – and in connection to – all other themed articles within this special issue. As a result, it is best read as part of the issue as a whole.

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# 'Enough to make you sick!' Pathological Characteristics of the Australian Academic Workplace\*

**PETER TREGEAR, JAMES GUTHRIE, STEPHEN LAKE,  
ADAM LUCAS, JUSTIN O'CONNOR,  
ALESSANDRO PELIZZON AND OLIVER VODEB**

*Drawing on the authors' experiences in the Australian academic workplace as well as relevant recent scholarship and public commentary, this paper presents a broad overview and discussion of some of the institutional and cultural characteristics of the working environment typical of contemporary Australian universities that make them prone to unhealthy levels of workplace stress and mental injury. The paper argues that if we are to resolve the contradiction between the privileged financial and regulatory status universities continue to enjoy and the corrosion of their putative commitments to the pursuit of truth and free inquiry, a new generation of university leaders will be required to commit their institutions to being open, publicly accountable and democratic in their organisation and goals.*

**KEYWORDS:** Australian universities; workplace health and safety; cognitive stress; academic principles; change management.

## Introduction: An Academic Identity Crisis

Just what does it mean for someone to call themselves an academic in Australia today? A prosaic answer might refer to the existence of salaried or contracted work as such in one of the country's forty-three public and private universities. But that is neither a necessary nor sufficient definition for academics themselves. As is the case for other traditionally public-orientated spheres of employment such as medicine (or – if we briefly remove the veil of cynicism that now typically envelops them – politics and the law) there is a fundamentally constitutive element to an academic career that transcends mere institutional imprimatur. It is what makes the job a vocation as well as a profession. Academic labour incorporates a call-to-service, no less; it involves communion with, and fidelity to, a constellation of values and principles that include the idea of a university itself.

There is, therefore, an inherent tension built into academic employment. A successful academic career requires the ability to balance the demands of the 'day job' – the prosaic and pragmatic rules and regulations that are part and parcel of institutional life – with the desire to uphold and promote those values and principles. Of particular salience are those that support teaching and research in the service of the pursuit of truth, and the creation and dissemination of public knowledge.

Universities have traditionally managed this tension through a sense of joint trusteeship of, and responsibility to, the vocational aspects of academic life shared between academics and those who manage and support their labour. This was supported by organisational structures that gave all academic staff a significant say in their own management (Pelizzon et al. this issue; Lake et al. this issue). Leadership positions such as head of department and even vice-chancellor were commonly filled by election and regularly rotated. Of course, such governance structures were not without their challenges, but they undoubtedly also helped encourage a positively framed culture of mutual responsibility, collegiality, and accountability on campus.

Today, however, that culture has been replaced by one characterised by chronic levels of mistrust between academics and those who manage them (Bell et al. 2012). As all of the contributions in this special issue clearly demonstrate, the priorities of neoliberalism and its handmaiden, New Public Management, are now commonly expressed and applied in ways that not only seem indifferent (at best) to the peculiar needs and ethical demands of teaching and scholarship, but also to the overarching public mission of a university (Baum et al. this issue; Guthrie and Lucas, this issue; Hil et al. this issue; Lake et al. this issue; Pelizzon et al. this issue; Vodeb et al.

this issue). Indeed, academic managers, not academics themselves, have become the ultimate determiners of the purpose of teaching and research, a fundamental shift that Margaret Thornton has summarised as 'the transformation of higher education from a predominantly public to a predominantly private good' (Thornton 2014: 10).

For university employees themselves, the result is what Richard Winter (2009) describes as an 'academic identity schism'. It is no mere 'academic' matter; numerous empirical studies have now demonstrated that academic workplaces are characterised by 'increasing levels of job stress and declining job satisfaction' (Pop-Vasileva et al. 2011: 431). While workload pressures are a commonly identified symptom of the unhappy academic workplace, this is ultimately much more than just a workload issue. Because of a tendency to identify with their labour, academics have always been prone to over-work: to consider their work to be not only a professional but also a personal responsibility. Research work in particular is, of course, also notoriously open-ended; there is *always* more work to do. Today, however, the nature and focus of that labour is no longer largely under an academic's own control. Thus, when researchers have measured levels of stress in academic staff, time and pressure demands tend to emerge as secondary concerns to the changing character of academic work itself (Bell et al. 2012: 32).

The problem is fundamentally cultural. University management is now prone to 'placing increasing pressure on all aspects of academic work with no recognition of the epistemological and sociological dimensions of disciplines' (Pop-Vasileva et al. 2011: 427, 428), and no interest in what Beatson et al. (2021) have identified as the principles and practices of academic citizenship. Rather, a 'rhetoric of instruction and compliance' replaces one once based in a 'collaborative discourse of request and consent' (West 2016). Values that an academic might seek routinely to profess to uphold in one's work such as a commitment to reason, objectivity, public responsibility, and the pursuit of knowledge are routinely compromised, thwarted, trivialised, or dismissed by those above them. Instead, staff who reasonably question managerial decisions can find themselves stripped of their capacity to function in, let alone enjoy, their workplace.

### Unsafe workplaces

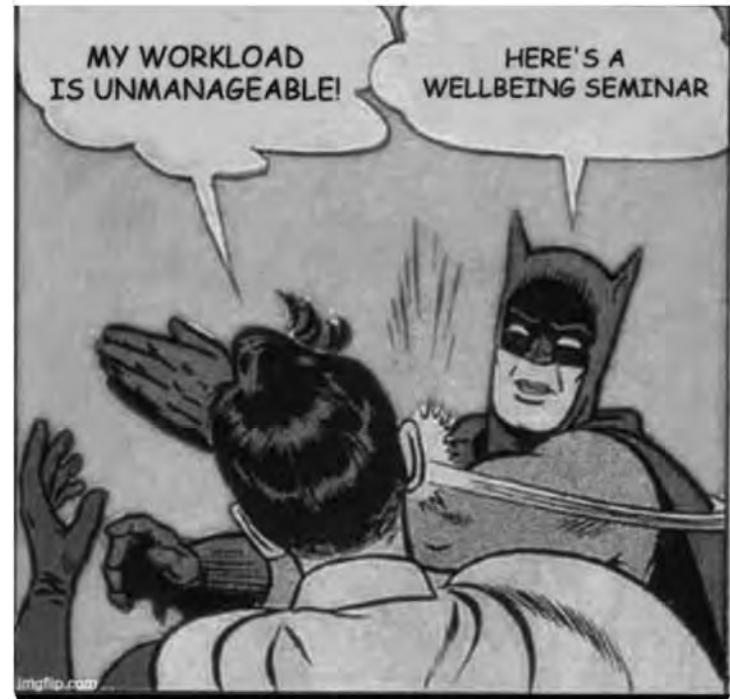
It is this gulf between the ideal and reality of university life in Australia that has made academic labour constitutively unhealthy and unsafe. As a result, a form of gaslighting in which academic employees are told one thing (directly by their managers and indirectly through university branding and the like) about the character and value of their work but experience something very different on a day-to-day basis, has become an unavoidable aspect of an academic's lived experience. The consequential cognitive dissonance can lead to mental injury (Ahern

2018; Baum et al. this issue). The typical responses by Australian university management to academic mental health issues, however, tend to compound the risk by promoting wellness programs and other initiatives designed to increase resilience in academic staff rather than contemplate the possibility that the academic workplace itself may be the root cause of the problem. The Australian National University (ANU), for instance, declares that it 'recognises the importance of physical, emotional, social, financial and environmental wellbeing in our whole lives as well as in the workplace', but seeks only to help staff 'build resilience' and 'keep flexible' (ANU 2021). And at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), a contracted provider, 'Assure Programs' offers support for all staff to improve and maintain wellbeing and assist with managing personal or professional challenges such as 'periods of change' (QUT 2020).

Nisha Khot  
@Nishaobgyn

And it's mandatory...

Anncaro1 @AnnCaro1 · 12 Oct  
Just love this.



[Figure 1. Knott (2021) Source:<https://twitter.com/Nishaobgyn/status/1447889759641096194>]

As UK-based journalist Emily Reynolds (2018) has observed, it is easy to see why such programs are so popular with management. Rather than suggesting, let alone focusing on, how workplace culture or practices might be the principal cause of mental health problems, the responsibility for dealing with the illnesses that arise is thrown back squarely onto the employee. It is the employee who is inadequate, rather than the workplace, or the managerial controls placed upon it. As Moran

(2021) noted, calls by management for staff to access employee assistance programs or staff wellbeing portals and the like do not even pretend to understand what the root causes of staff distress might be. Rather, they reflect 'a well-rehearsed script for diverting attention away from their own problematic cultures' (Fleming 2021: 88). It could well be argued that their ultimate purpose is in fact to immunise university management 'against scrutiny and challenge' and to deflect attention away from the changing nature of the university itself. As one anonymous Australian academic recently wrote:

Health, safety and wellbeing at my university is dominated by psychological frameworks for 'mental wellbeing' that ignore other ways of thinking about health and wellbeing (like cultural or structural approaches). The close relationship between wellbeing and health as a psychological practice (rather than also a cultural, social, political or structural one) and HR's goals (our alignment to the university's culture as a means of meeting ever-changing productivity targets) feels like a conflict of interest. I am not sure that our wellbeing neatly aligns with university productivity, nor should it be, especially when job losses over the last decades and intensifying work demands inherently decrease wellbeing. Although the strategic planning that guides wellbeing work at the university stresses that this is the work of leaders just as much as everyone else, leadership rarely demonstrates empathy or an understanding of academic work in Australia. We could cross off any reference to the university in strategic wellbeing documents and add in 'insurance company' or 'digital marketing company' instead, and nothing would need to be changed in plans and documents; context is ignored (Anon, 2021).

Under Federal (Work Health and Safety Act 2011) and equivalent State-based Australian workplace legislation, such a displacement or avoidance of duty of care should not be occurring. An employer's work, health and safety responsibilities do not just apply to risks posed to a person's physical integrity in the workplace; any employer – including a university – is, in theory, also obligated to provide a workplace that is pro-active and protective of the psychological integrity and health of its employees. It is, however, now all too easy for the senior management and HR to respond to distress in the workplace as principally a performance management issue. Whether that distress manifests itself in overtly bad (such as bullying or harassing) management practices or not, there is also a clear conflict of interest and obvious disincentive for management to deal with the underlying causes of mental illnesses in employees. Thus, those causes remain largely hidden from appropriate internal or external scrutiny (and reform).

Former ANU academic David West has, instead, observed that:

...the modern university most rewards those who demonstrate both loyalty to superiors and effective control of subordinates. Good managers are those who get things done, which tends to mean that they are not hampered by either sensitivity for others' feelings or democratic scruples. They are assessed according to results rather than the methods they employ, by ends rather than means. It is little surprise, then, that managers are sometimes tempted to resort to a more intense regime of control (West 2016).

Or as a German-based academic Irina Dumitrescu (2019) has posited: 'Universities sing the song of meritocracy but dance to a different tune. In reality, they will do everything to reward and protect their most destructive, abusive and uncooperative faculty.'

### Constant change management

It is arguable, indeed, that university management is not only prone to dismiss any institutional basis for staff distress, it has in fact effectively weaponised it. 'Change management', for instance, is one of the more prominent tools for staff restructure that has arisen in Australian universities over the past few decades, and which has proliferated since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. It claims for itself a presumptive legitimacy and reasonableness; it brooks no dissent. If there is a consultation period it almost always is a mere 'going through the motions', and practically meaningless. There is an *a priori* assumption that not only the change itself is necessary, but the way it is to be implemented is appropriate. As the QUT example (QUT 2020) example demonstrates, staff who dissent can instead find themselves funnelled into resilience and wellbeing programs. Thus, change management processes arguably both generate, and takes advantage of, staff distress to achieve their industrial goals.

This would be bad enough under any normal employment circumstances, but academics are specifically, and rigorously, trained to question blanket assumptions and fallacious arguments as professional *sine qua non*. Consequently, working under a false promise of a meaningful process of consultation, or misleading justifications for wholesale change, can be especially jarring.

One recent example of such a change management process at work was Monash University's announcement in September 2020 that would disestablish its musicology and ethnomusicology specialisms along with its Centre for Theatre and Performance. Within a few days more than

70 leading academics from across the globe signed a joint letter to the Monash Vice-Chancellor asking if there were any compelling scholarly and educational reasons for these changes. No such reasons were forthcoming. Nor was any rigorous enrolment data or financial modelling provided. In this case, staff in the School of Music, supported by the NTEU, argued that enrolments in these specialisms were well above the University's stated minimum. As one employee who lost her job put it, 'It's a pointless little fight with a faceless entity', also noting that 'I took my job personally and put so much of myself into it, that it's impossible to separate my feelings from the erasure of the career I'm so passionate about' (Kilpatrick 2020). Justification for the cuts was ultimately based in a series of measures the University had brought in to ameliorate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the university's finances, and yet three months later the University announced an operating *surplus* of a staggering \$259 million (Tregear 2020; Ross 2021).

Without open access to the data that university management rely on in their change management documents, academic freedom itself is curtailed – the very tools of critique and analysis that academics use to understand the world around them are simply not able to be applied in any meaningful way to their own employment circumstances (Guthrie and Lucas, this issue). Staff must simply adapt or get off the bus. Thus, when documents concerning the targeting of specific staff for redundancies in the University of Western Australia's School of Molecular Sciences were leaked to the public in October 2021, the University's response was to report the leak to police for investigation rather than admit that the documents suggested that management had engaged in a sham consultation process and set out to avoid freedom of information requests (Styles 2021). Change management has become, rather, 'the shibboleth of a financialised capitalism that sees human capital as a faceless element in an inexorable process and a fixed cost to be reduced' (Anon 2021; cf. Guthrie and Lucas, this issue). If academic staff find it difficult to accept, they are the problem, not the change itself. All the associated 'human turmoil is hidden inside that insipid, unassailable phrase, *change management*' (Moran 2021).

### Trust deficits

Change management, however, is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg in a broader process of destabilising and disenfranchisement that is now typical of the way departments in Australian universities are run and how they compromise the health and integrity of staff. While research has rather unsurprisingly shown that employees as a rule feel more valued when the workplace is based on mutual trust between themselves and their employer (Arias 2021), for academics such trust is an even more fundamental determiner of workplace happiness: it is 'integral to the safe working conditions of academic life'

(Grierson 2018: 210). Or in the words of Roy Jenkins:

To be happy and productive, faculty need to feel trusted, but we also need to believe we can trust our leaders – to be open and honest, to follow through on promises, and to have the best interests of students and faculty at heart. In my experience, a department or campus suffering from low morale is almost always a place where faculty members do not have that kind of confidence in the administration. It's a place where trust has been broken (Jenkins 2016).

Senior managerial appointments and contract extensions, however, are now routinely made without genuine staff consultation or review. The division between them and the academics they manage is secured by a considerable salary divide (and the sense of superiority that that so easily engenders), and by controlling internal flows of resources and information (Guthrie and Lucas, this issue). Academics who nevertheless reasonably question managerial decisions can all-too-easily be stripped of their capacity to be happy in, let alone function in, their workplace.

One of us (Tregear) encountered such an extreme workplace culture when he was appointed as Professor and Head of the ANU School of Music in 2012. Given a specific mandate to 'rescue' the School from what had been widely recognised as an industrial (and public) relations disaster that followed a poorly structured and implemented 'change management' process undertaken earlier that year, he did so on the basis that the ANU was acting in good faith, both in its undertakings made upon commencement in the role, but also to the wider public in the print and broadcast media, that it genuinely sought to establish a new, financially sustainable, and 'future-proof' foundation for the School. He soon became aware, however, that it was being deliberately under-resourced and the more he enquired about the financial and staffing circumstances under which the School was now operating, the more hostile his working environment became. From mid-2014 Tregear was denied all budget information; an ANU Deputy Vice-Chancellor later acknowledged that, in fact, budget data had been withheld from the School for the entirety of his tenure (Macdonald 2015).

The following year he was confidentially informed by a member of ANU Council that this was the result of deliberate actions by ANU management to allow conditions in the School to decline to such an extent that it would proffer no resistance to further curriculum changes. This advice was subsequently independently corroborated in a Statutory Declaration Tregear received from a former senior employee. In any event, lacking basic strategic, operational, and budgetary stability, academic and professional staff were unable to fulfill their

overriding moral and contractual responsibilities to deliver high-quality and sustainable educational programs. The majority of School staff (including Tregear) felt they had no alternative but to leave in order to preserve both their professional integrity and their health.

The situation at the ANU School of Music could be summarised as a centralised, and relentlessly opaque, system of budgetary and human-resources control matched by an equally entrenched broader corporate culture that eschewed criticism, let alone genuine accountability of senior management. There was a rigidly institutionalised lack of transparency about how the University's money is distributed and spent, both at the top-level and at the 'coal-face' of teaching and research, as well as a tendency to 'shoot the messenger' rather than deal with genuine problems as they arose.

Similarly, when Murdoch University academic Gerd Schröder-Turk raised concerns about international student welfare and admission standards in an ABC Four Corners program, the University instituted disciplinary procedures against him and ultimately pursued him for damages arising from the alleged reputational damage he had caused. Ironically, that brought censure upon Murdoch University from around the world for what was widely considered to be an act of intimidation to silence whistleblowing and principled dissent. The University eventually backed down, but the message to its staff was clear: Those who question managerial decisions will pay a high personal price (Worthington 2020; Bröhmer 2021).

There are, however, many urgent and just reasons for staff to be speaking up and out. For instance, as John Ross has been reporting in a series of articles for the *Times Higher Education* and James Guthrie similarly for the *Campus Morning Mail*, a sector-wide culture of financial obfuscation has now developed across Australia's public universities (Ross 2021a, 2021b; Guthrie 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; cf. Guthrie and Lucas this issue). The resulting 'rubbery figures' thwart efforts of academics themselves to research the sector, 'ironic given that universities themselves employ researchers who rely on precise data, and whose journal articles can be withdrawn over inadvertent errors' (Ross 2021b).

Furthermore, the opaque allocation of funds within universities themselves may not in itself be corrupt, but it most certainly lends itself to corruption. It far too easily allows a culture of patronage, compliance, favouritism, and uncritical acquiescence to prosper among the staff who are subject to it. Certainly, rumours of nepotism, secret special favours, and even blatant fraud continue to be rife across all the universities at which we are employed.

Meanwhile, the capacity of an academic to fulfil the vocational demands of the job can diminish not so much as a result of direct intervention by management, as indirect application of fear, or by simply diminishing the circumstances in which exercising such freedoms can be effective (Salaita 2019; Lucas 2021). But if we want our campuses to be run more effectively and honestly, then:

trustful relationships must be available and workable for academics as a fundamental quality of their employment standing ... One must be able to believe and trust in the virtue of trust, for therein lies the virtue of justice; and those who are party to its enactment must be faithful to an agreed set of fiduciary principles. This involves the adoption and exercise of both rights and obligations. Ultimately... if justice is to be served, trust, which is an otherwise abstract concept, must be available and actionable as a rights and duty-based virtue, in and through employer–employee relations (Grierson 2018: 210).

### **The post-truth campus**

Here again the problem is not just the obvious one that bad bosses, or bad working conditions, can lead to unhealthy workplaces and injured workers. With universities we also face the conundrum that academic employment would normally be expected to protect and uphold the very standards of discourse that are now being undermined as a constitutive part of what it means to be an academic. As Fish (2017) noted when distinguishing a general right to free speech from academic freedom:

Accuracy of speech is an academic value; completeness of speech is an academic value; relevance of speech is an academic value. Each of these values is directly related to the goal of academic inquiry: getting a matter of fact right. The operative commonplace is 'following the evidence wherever it leads.' You can't do that if your sources are suspect or non-existent; you can't do that if you only consider evidence favourable to your biases; you can't do that if your evidence is far afield and hasn't been persuasively connected to the instant matter of fact (Fish 2017).

But academics now work in universities that no longer envision their primary objective as the production and dissemination of knowledge for its intrinsic or use value. Instead, we work in institutions that conceptualise knowledge production as necessarily part of the production of 'exchange' values (Edward and Roy 2017). In this way, the university 'forces us to internalise the creation of value and the extraction of value and the accumulation of value' (Hall 2014). In so doing, academic

labour approximates the nature of labour in capitalist society more generally by being focused not on a social good, *per se*, but rather on how it can ‘maximize profits, facilitate endless capital accumulation, and reproduce capitalist class power’ (Harvey 2014: 96–97, quoted in Berg et al. 2016: 11).

To take one painfully obvious example: administrative tools and metrics are becoming the chief, if not the only way, teaching and research is evaluated (O’Connell et al. 2021). Research exercises, student evaluations and the like have become ubiquitous drivers of content in academic departments and the actual substance of a curriculum can seem to become less important than how efficiently and attractively that curriculum is delivered. This creates the impression that administrators, not professors or other disciplinary experts, are becoming the ultimate determiners of educational and research goals:

Ask about virtually any problem in the university today and the solution proposed will inevitably be administrative. Why? Because we think administrators, not professors, guarantee the quality of the product and the achievement of institutional goals. But how is that possible in an academic environment in which knowledge and understanding are the true goals? Without putting too fine a point on it, it’s because they aren’t the true goals any longer (Srigley 2018).

In such an environment, too, ‘bullying is almost inevitable’ (Fleming 2021: 60). One recent study found that one-quarter of staff across 19 Australian universities had been the victim of harassment and bullying at work (Broadbent 2015). As West (2016) has noted, however, ‘complaint procedures take place within the organizational hierarchy that produced the complaint in the first place, a hierarchy designed to confer authority on superiors and induce obedience in subordinates’.

Speaking truth to power on campus has also become legally constrained, notwithstanding that subdivision 19-G of the *Higher Education Support Act* (HESA) 2003 which states that universities ‘must have a policy that upholds free intellectual inquiry in relation to learning, teaching and research’. One particularly insidious example is the rise to ubiquity of so-called ‘gagging’ clauses to silence staff who have decided, for whatever reason, to leave an institution’s employ. Commonly, such clauses come at a significant financial cost to the institution, but that cost is also hidden from annual reports and such-like, even though it is the Australian taxpayer who ultimately foots the bill. The UK Liberal Democratic Party was correct to highlight the dismal impact of such clauses in 2016. Its then-leader, Tim Farron, observed:

Universities are supposed to be bastions of free speech and forthright opinions, yet our research has shown that confidentiality clauses may have been used not only to avoid dirty laundry being aired in public but now are just common practice in higher education. This is simply outrageous. These gagging orders have a deterrent effect, employers seem to think that employees will just sign away the right to whistle blow. The cold wind of gagging staff and stifled debate, much in the public interest, is going through the halls of our bastions of enlightenment and tolerance (Mason 2016).

Academics should, however, be able to speak out about research, teaching and university governance even when doing so involves harsh and even disrespectful criticism (Evans and Stone 2021). Such academic disputes deserve to be fierce because the stakes are actually very high. The fact that academics are now commonly suppressed from freely doing so also helps make the work of academics themselves less trustworthy – and thus less effective in the promotion of truth-claims and the expertise that supports them – in our society more broadly.

The cognitive stress that arises from this collective inability to speak freely about how things really are on campus is especially acute in the humanities – the discipline areas also tending to bear the brunt of change management programs in Australian universities. This is because we are trained to be especially aware about how ‘language shapes reality as well as reflecting it’ and thus we are prone to have an especially sceptical attitude towards managerial gobbledegook and spin. We develop heightened skills to recognise, as Moran (2021) observes, that discourses ‘can wake the mind up or anaesthetise it. They can polish reality so it gleams or hide it behind a rusty carapace of cliché, cant and sloganeering’. How refreshing would it be instead, he speculates, ‘to read an official university document that treated its readers like human beings, by trying to persuade them with defensible arguments, fine distinctions and honest doubts. We would live richer, more productive and more authentic working lives’. We would also, fundamentally, be doing the job we signed up to do, the job for which we believed it was worth committing our working lives.

## Conclusion

In his 1993 Reith Lectures, Edward Said suggested that if the public purpose and function of university teaching and scholarship was to be preserved, we might need to reconceive our idea of academic life as being not only separate from, but also increasingly incompatible with, modern academic employment. Instead of simply ‘doing what one is supposed to do’, he argued, an academic always also needs to ask ‘why one does it, who benefits from it’. Ultimately an academic is charged with asking

'[h]ow does one speak the truth? What truth? For whom and where?' (Said 1996: 83). And the exercise of such a clarity of purpose, in the sense of a foundational commitment to honest discourse, most certainly needs to begin at home (that is, on campus).

For that to be possible today, however, senior management would need – among other things – to relinquish much of their now near-total control over academic departments, and instead recommit to the collegial, consensual, cooperative character of academic employment (Pop-Vasileva et al. 2011; Vodeb et al. this issue; Hil et al. this issue). It is currently hard to conceive, however, just what might precipitate such change. If anything, the disenfranchisement and disempowerment of academics in their workplace has only gotten worse since COVID-19 gave academic managers a potent new source of apparent legitimacy for continued workplace 'reforms' (Littleton and Stanford 2021; Carnegie et al. 2021). Meanwhile, it is not just academics who continue to suffer. We are all disadvantaged when our universities are no longer concerned with placing trust and mutual accountability at the core of their social contracts with their own staff, or indeed with the wider world.

And yet our universities continue to be treated with very privileged financial and regulatory settings as if they were still driven by, and for, an underlying public purpose (Mason 2016; Guthrie and Lucas, this issue). This contradiction can in turn be traced to 'a wider system of anxiety production arising as part of the so-called soft capitalism encapsulating everything, including life itself, in contemporary late liberalism' (Berg et al. 2016: 11). If we are ultimately to resolve this contradiction, we will need to find a new generation of university leaders prepared to commit their institutions to the fearless, open, and publicly accountable pursuit of free inquiry, and do so in a democratic and transparent fashion. In sum, we will need to find academic principals who truly understand and express academic principles. Should we fail in this now-urgent task of institutional reform, it will be not only a professional responsibility, but increasingly a visceral necessity, for vocational academics to re-form somewhere else.

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#### Notes:

\* This article has been written in dialogue with – and in connection to – all other themed articles within this special issue. As a result, it is best read as part of the issue as a whole.

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# The Corporate University and its Impact on Health in Australia\*

**FRAN BAUM, MAUREEN DOLLARD, MATTHEW FISHER,  
TOBY FREEMAN AND LAREEN NEWMAN**

*Our article considers the ways in which changes to the governance, culture and missions of universities have raised significant health issues for staff and students. We report data which indicates that Australian university personnel in 2021 are 2.5 times more likely than the national population to work in a high-risk psychosocial climate. We examine the following features of universities that can threaten health: corporatisation; frequent restructuring; undue pressure to win grants and publish; excessive workloads and casualisation of staff; less democratic governance; a culture of fear and bullying; the use of slogans. These features create dilemmatic spaces and moral crises which affect the health and wellbeing of academics and their ability to perform at their best. Students are also affected in terms of tuition debts and a decline in the quality of the university experience. We conclude with a consideration of what a healthier university organisational environment might look like.*

**KEYWORDS:** Universities, psychosocial safety climate, mental health, employment, governance, university

## Introduction

How do you imagine university life? As a life with time to contemplate and mull over tricky intellectual issues? Professors challenging students through debate in small classes that they feel really well prepared for? Conducting impactful research that has been well-funded? A relaxed life with none of the pressures of the commercial world? A job for life? Well think again. Other articles in this issue show that Australian universities have been through dramatic change in the last three decades. Commentators have noted radical changes away from a collegiate to a corporate style of management (Connell 2019), which promotes profits generating activities and competition between staff. These changes to the governance, culture and missions of universities have raised significant health issues for staff and students (see, for example Smyth 2017; Rickwood et al. 2016). Here we consider these changes through the lens of their mental health impact. We also present data which show that the mental health of university staff is not tracking well. Then we analyse the pathways between the changes and health impacts and illustrate this with case examples. We argue that universities have become dilemmatic spaces for many academics, creating moral crises which affect their health and wellbeing and ability to perform at their best. We also examine how the contemporary university has an adverse impact on students' health. We conclude with a consideration of what a healthier university organisational environment might look like.

## Social Determinants of Physical and Mental Health

The impact of social determinants of health is empirically confirmed in a large body of research and accepted as having a powerful impact by the World Health Organization Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2008). Workplace environments have been shown to have a considerable impact on health (Aronsson et al. 2017; Hofmann et al. 2017; Loh et al. 2019). To understand the impacts of corporatised university environments on the mental health of their staff it is necessary to appreciate evidence on social determinants of mental health (Fisher and Baum 2010). Mental health is like a canary in a coal mine in terms of health as it shows up quickly whereas physical health impacts typically show up in the longer term. The evidence on mental health shows that, in conditions where people experience a lack of control over their circumstances, negative evaluation of themselves from others and/or excessive demands on their attention and time, they are likely to undergo heightened stress arousal. If such conditions persist over time, and people do not have any way to readily avoid or resolve them, chronic stress and burnout is likely to result. Chronic stress is very well understood as a causal contributor to common forms of mental ill-health such as psychological distress, anxiety and depression. It can also have adverse impacts on other health conditions such as metabolic syndrome, cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis and sleep disorders (Chrousos 2009).

Chronic stress affects health directly by influencing hormonal changes, compromising the immune system, increased blood pressure and other changes in the body and brain. People under chronic stress are also more likely to engage in harmful behaviours as forms of relief seeking.

Workplaces are social and organisational environments in which stress demands can arise, with potentially adverse consequences for employees' mental or physical health. Inequalities in working conditions can contribute to health inequities (Benach et al. 2007). Workplace conditions shown empirically to be associated with stress and adverse impacts on mental health include: high psychological or physical demands, low levels of decision-making latitude or control, an imbalance between effort and reward, a lack of support from co-workers or management, adverse changes in working conditions, dissatisfaction with working hours, and low job security (Wilkins and Beaudet 1998; Butterworth et al. 2011). Psychological distress caused by working conditions such as increased casualisation meaning more insecurity and high demands can readily 'flow on' to have adverse effects on interpersonal and private lives and on health behaviours such as alcohol consumption (Dorrian et al. 2011). Conversely, work that is secure and fairly paid, and provides for a sense of control and autonomy, is positive for mental health and wellbeing.

### The psychological safety climate of Australian universities

There are many causes of work stress and a leading indicator or 'cause of the causes' is the corporate climate for worker psychological health, referred to as the psychosocial safety climate (PSC) (Dollard and Bakker 2010). PSC concerns the prioritisation that senior management give to worker psychological health over productivity, senior management commitment to work stress prevention, and the development and maintenance of organisational systems where employees can communicate about psychosocial factors that affect their psychological health and participate in the elimination or resolution of risk factors. In high PSC contexts, senior management are concerned about the psychological health of employees, and they will work to ensure employees have good jobs where work is secure, demands are manageable, work is meaningful, there are enough job resources such as job control and social support to undertake various tasks, rewards are adequate, and work is free from harassment, discrimination and bullying. There is much empirical evidence linking low PSC to poor work conditions and in turn to worker distress, burnout, depression, turnover, cardiovascular symptoms, and injury (Loh et al. 2020; Zadow et al. 2021; Zadow et al. 2017). Knowing about PSC, we can predict future work conditions and distress of employees, so taking a snapshot of PSC across Australian universities is informative (Dollard and Bailey 2019).

**Table 1: PSC risk for future stressful work conditions and mental health problems**

PSC Standards Range 12 – 60	National Sample (AWB 2014-15) n = 4150 (weighted) Number (%) Bailey, Dollard et al (2015)	National Sample (AWB 2021) n = 1439 (weighted) Number (%) Hall, Dollard et al (2021)	Victorian Public Sector Oct 2020 n = 45956 Workers Number (%)	Australian University Staff 2020 (across 40 universities) n = 2164 Number (%) Lushington et al. (2021)	Australian University Staff 2021 (across 40 universities) n = 1602 Number (%) Lushington et al. (2021)
High PSC ≥ 41	2450 (58.8)	951 (66)	27113 (59)	592 (27.4)	368 (23.0)
Medium PSC 41 < and > 37	380 (9.1)	86 (6)	3353 (7.3)	230 (10.6)	119 (7.4)
Low PSC 37 ≤ and > 26	873 (21.0)	268 (18.6)	10111 (22)	757 (35.0)	589 (36.8)
Very low PSC ≤ 26	454 (10.9)	133 (9.3)	5379 (11.7)	585 (27.0)	526 (32.8)

Evidence-based levels of PSC risk for future stressful work conditions and mental health problems (Bailey et al. 2015; Hall, et al. 2010) in Australian universities can be seen in Table 1. In the first columns we can see nationally representative data from employees across Australian occupations and industries and the Victorian public sector. In the final columns we see risk levels for Australian university staff from 2020 and 2021. The data show that Australian university personnel in 2021 are 2.5 times more likely than the national population in 2021, and 2 times more likely than the Victorian Public sector in 2020, to work in a high-risk corporate climate. These woeful statistics are likely to reflect primarily issues inside universities but also in their operating environment. These external factors include a reduction in government support and social protection factors such as union density (Dollard and Neser 2013) and a neoliberal policy environment that encourages universities to act like corporations, leading management to press university personnel to work for profits and to use managerial techniques that are ill suited to encouraging academic work. It should be noted that corporations with appropriate management values can rank with a low risk psychosocial safety climate, but not one Australian university currently ranks as low risk.

### **What are the Corporate University's Practices that Create Stress, Anxiety and Depression?**

There is a growing literature on the impacts of Australian universities on employee mental health. One commentator has gone so far as to describe the atmosphere in them as toxic (Smyth 2017). Here we identify features of contemporary Australian universities which impact on the health of staff and students. These include corporatisation, frequent restructuring, pressure to win grants and publish, excessive teaching loads, the practice of using casual staff for much of the teaching, the use of corporate slogans seen as akin to 'double-think', and a move away from democratic governance. Our description of these practices draws on the authors' lived experiences, and peer reviewed and grey literature.

#### *Change from public good institutions to corporations*

The over-riding observable change is that universities have shifted their focus from their public good role to become more like private sector corporations. The South Australia Independent Commission on Corruption (SA ICAC) conducted a University Integrity survey in 2020 (Independent Commission Against Corruption – South Australia 2020). The report noted that in a survey of staff, what the report authors described as the 'corporatisation' or 'monetisation' of the university was the subject of a large volume of feedback. These comments typically described the university as overly focused on money, student fees and the enrolment of full fee-paying students. Sixty-one respondents described feeling pressure to work excessive

hours, problems in the processes for allocating work or determining work capacity, being underpaid or working for free (Independent Commission Against Corruption – South Australia 2020: 34). In a 2019 national survey, 55% of university staff said universities have become too corporate in their outlook (NTEU 2021).

#### *Frequent restructuring*

Restructures are how university senior executives seek to control costs and reshape the disciplines and purpose of a university. Most, if not all, Australian universities have been subject to these restructures. At one university where restructures were announced staff were told to look up a document to see their staff number to find out if they were 'affected' or 'unaffected'. The stress caused for the staff 'affected' – which often meant a forced 'voluntary' redundancy – is obvious. The staff who were 'unaffected' faced survivor guilt and the prospect of a higher workload. Ironically three of the authors of this chapter were directly affected by a restructure which disestablished the research institute in which they worked and the position of its director (FB). This happened despite FB winning a highly competitive National Health and Medical Research Council Investigator Grant worth \$2.24m and having a stellar record winning competitive grants over 30 years. While the university gave a restructure and change of priorities as the reasons for the 'disestablishment', they happened against a background of claimed financial deficits and also were claimed to be targeting critical voices. The NTEU branch (NTEU Branch Flinders University, 2021) noted 'In the NTEU's view it is no coincidence that numerous of those whose positions are in jeopardy are staff who have been diligent in their obligation to voice a dissenting view, rigorous in support of discipline integrity when it has been jeopardised by management actions, and who have been tirelessly collegial in their support of colleagues and workplace rights.' In addition, humanities and social science academics appear to have been targeted more for disestablishment/redundancy than others. For example, the departments in University of Sydney's Faculty of Arts have been abolished, and many staff and courses are facing the axe (Riemer 2021). Such restructures have intensified since COVID-19 as universities ostensibly struggle to cope with the financial impact of losing international student income. University management has justified them based on the necessity of cutting costs even though some analyses suggest the universities are not as financially pressured as they claim, and it is entrepreneurial business models adopted by university executives that are the cause of the deficits (Guthrie 2021). There has been some fight back from university staff but the process of being involved in such struggles is stressful, undermines confidence and many are too afraid of losing their jobs because of speaking out. But university students are becoming visibly more active,

demonstrating against the cuts at several universities in 2021 (SBS 2021).

#### *Pressure to win grants and publish*

University staff are under extreme pressure to win external grant funding. Yet as this pressure has increased, the success rates for the nationally competitive National Health and Medical Research Council and Australian Research Council grants have reduced significantly from around 25% a decade or more ago to schemes that have 8% or 9% success rates and very few over 18%. Not winning a grant for early and mid-career professionals is a cause for anxiety which may tip into depression. University systems have always emphasised short-term, individual track records (such as the track record for the last 5-year sections in grant applications), but this has increased with managerial approaches and shrinking grant success rates and is stressful for academics who seek to be collaborative, supportive team members. As examples, we have seen metric calculations heavily disincentivise the addition of colleagues to grant applications and growing stoushes between universities on collaborative grants on how much money each university would receive from the grant. A further pressure is the need to publish more than in the past. Academics are frequently judged by their H-index, a composite measure of how much other people quote and value their work. It has many flaws in terms of its ability to compare different disciplines or people at different points in their career. Despite this, people's worth is often judged this way, with pernicious mental health effects for those who don't measure up. This leads to the pressures the SA ICAC noted that 'There is far too much pressure and negative consequences for staff who do not win grant funding or publish sufficient numbers of high-quality publications. Inevitably, this pressure will lead to inappropriate conduct and/or extreme stress and mental health problems' (Independent Commission Against Corruption – South Australia 2020: 63).

#### *Workloads and casual staff*

Added to the pressures to win grants and conduct research are the pressures to increase the amount of teaching that staff are required to do. While many universities have a workload formula, these formulae do not appear to stem many reports of overwork and unreasonable and inequitable workloads. An increasing amount of university teaching is now done by casual staff who are paid on an hourly basis. A Senate Select Committee on Job Security (2021: 161) has painted a picture of the university sector as 'dominated by insecure work and exploitation'. In Australian universities, most employees are employed on a fixed term or casual basis but not out of choice; only 18% of casual academics and 27% of casual general staff prefer casual employment (Senate Select Committee, NTEU Submission 2021). Women are

more likely than men to have insecure forms of work. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU 2011) notes that insecure work has rapidly increased in Australia and evidence indicates a growing gap between a highly-paid executive class and a broader workforce experiencing stagnating wages and declining working conditions (Ziffer 2021). Universities have reflected this trend.

Casualised staff are typically young academics who are undertaking a PhD or have just completed one and who face years working as a casual tutor or research assistant with no job security. This is after studying for a minimum of six years. These staff have no security at all and usually find that they must do more hours of work than they are paid for. They do this work because they do not want their students to suffer and most are very reluctant to complain because their future academic career depends on gaining teaching experience. Recently wage theft has been uncovered in the sector, with universities forced to pay back wages (Cahill 2020; Hare 2021; Senate Select Committee 2021). The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (2021), the regulatory agency for higher education, acknowledged that '[u]nusually high reliance on casual staff poses risks for the quality of the student experience'.

Overworked teaching staff will not perform well. Their inability to teach at standards they perceive as adequate, because of workload pressures, is in itself stressful and anxiety provoking. The impact on the quality of teaching and learning is also significant. Students notice that they are taught primarily by casual staff and not the successful research-intensive staff. A Senate Select Committee (2021: 171) noted 'Feelings of loss of control and vulnerability are common in academics in insecure working arrangements. Insecure work can erode self-confidence, amplify feelings of helplessness and contribute to a general loss of mental wellbeing'. Academics affected in this way are unlikely to teach at their best.

Most university staff report working beyond their paid hours and still feel that they are not meeting institutional expectations. The NTEU (2021) estimates that median hours for full-time academic staff is around 50 per week, with many thousands working more than 55 hours per week. Such hours are unsustainable and represent a serious medium-term threat to the health and safety of many employees.

A further pressure on staff is that they find themselves teaching students whose English standard is not good. Yet if they fail these students, they come under pressure to revise the grade to a pass. The SA ICAC report

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(Independent Commission Against Corruption – South Australia, 2020: 36) noted:

There is pressure on people to change student grades from a fail to a pass. The students are normally international students with poor English skills.

An NTEU survey (2021) found that 30% of academics agreed or strongly agreed that they feel pressure to pass full fee-paying students whose work is not good enough. These pressures of overwork translate to both physical and mental health pressures. The workload pressures on staff also affect student wellbeing as staff are unable to perform at their best because of institutional pressure. In addition, Australian students are stressed by their accumulating tuition fee debts for a service that is declining in quality. Among medical students for example, debt levels are negatively associated with mental well-being and academic performance, and high debt is likely to drive students towards choosing higher paying specialties rather than areas of need such as rural and primary health care (Pisaniello et al. 2019). New Zealand research (Nissen et al. 2019), found that students who felt better about their financial situation reported significantly lower levels of stress, depression and anxiety.

#### *Less democratic governance and management*

An earlier paper in this issue detailed the ways in which democratic governance of universities has been progressively watered down so that staff and students have very little voice on governing councils. This trend is evident in the governance of sub-units of universities where Executive Deans have considerable power and democratic practices are rare. The impact of this is shown by this quote from the SA ICAC report (Independent Commission Against Corruption – South Australia 2020: 62).

The current workplace culture actively discourages ‘speaking truth to power’, particularly with respect to senior managers...Management professes that people are the most valuable resource, but every action they take contradicts this sentiment.

There is an extensive literature on the importance of control over work environments and how its absence has a negative impact on health (Marmot et al. 1991; Marmot et al. 1997; Kinman and Jones 2008). A further feature of Australian universities is that they pay their Vice Chancellors (Carey 2021) and other senior executive staff very high salaries compared to other public sector employment. This class of employee has burgeoned in the past two decades at the expense of academics who do

the actual teaching and research and whose salaries have risen little over the same period and many of whom are casual. This means decisions are being made by groups in which those with any depth of experience in research and teaching are in a considerable minority. Observing this and living with the consequences of such uninformed decisions is a major stressor for many academic staff.

#### *Culture of bullying and fear*

Another disturbing trend which reflects the decline in democracy in universities and has a direct impact on health is that universities are increasingly seen as places where there is a culture of bullying and fear. In her book *Bullshit Towers* Margaret Sims (Sims 2020) notes that this culture change has been evident in the past decade and that compared to earlier in her career she feels ‘as if I am working in a different world: a world where I am disrespected, not trusted, and through speaking-out labelled a trouble maker’ (p. 17). The SAICAC (p. 52) also highlighted the impact of this culture as ‘unnecessarily harmful manner, which has led to serious mental illness issues with a significant number of staff members.’ Staff ‘...are told that that is the way it works now and really the inference is “suck it up:” – to the extent staff have taken stress leave..... Valued and experienced staff ended up resigning. Dozens of people leave every year through illness gained by the toxic [redacted] culture’ (Independent Commission Against Corruption – South Australia 2020).

#### *Double think and weasel words*

Don’t you see the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought.

*George Orwell, 1984.*

A further practice that creates stressful conditions is the widespread use of corporate slogans to promote universities. Much of the language of corporate universities’ management are ‘Weasel Words’ as described by Don Watson (Watson 2004). He notes that the language of weasel words is widespread in modern bureaucracies and that it is a ‘language without possibilities. It cannot convey humour, fancy, feelings, nuance of the variety of experiences. It is cut off and cuts us off from provenance – it has no past’ (Watson 2004: 2). Such language is reflected in the short marketing phrases adopted by universities and dreamt up by the growing cohorts of university marketing executives tasked with ‘branding’ their institution. Recent examples are *Fearless* (Flinders) *Think. Change. Do* (Sydney), *New Intelligence* (Canberra) *Unlimited* (Western Sydney) *Know More. Do More* (Griffith). The ‘weasel word’ language is seemingly used to obscure truths and playdown problems. It presents an idealised view of university life that is increasingly detached from the experience of most staff. Its imprecision

and bending of real meaning have the effect of leaving people cynical and distrustful of their workplace. It also serves as a mechanism of control on staff and students as it limits thoughts and reflects a corporate sensibility which doesn't value history and experience.

Collectively the practices of the corporate university we have described above have created many dilemmas for those working in them. Together the practices make up more than the sum of their parts to create a working space which is dilemmatic. In the next section we examine this concept in more detail and examine the dilemmatic space that universities have become.

### 'Dilemmatic Space'

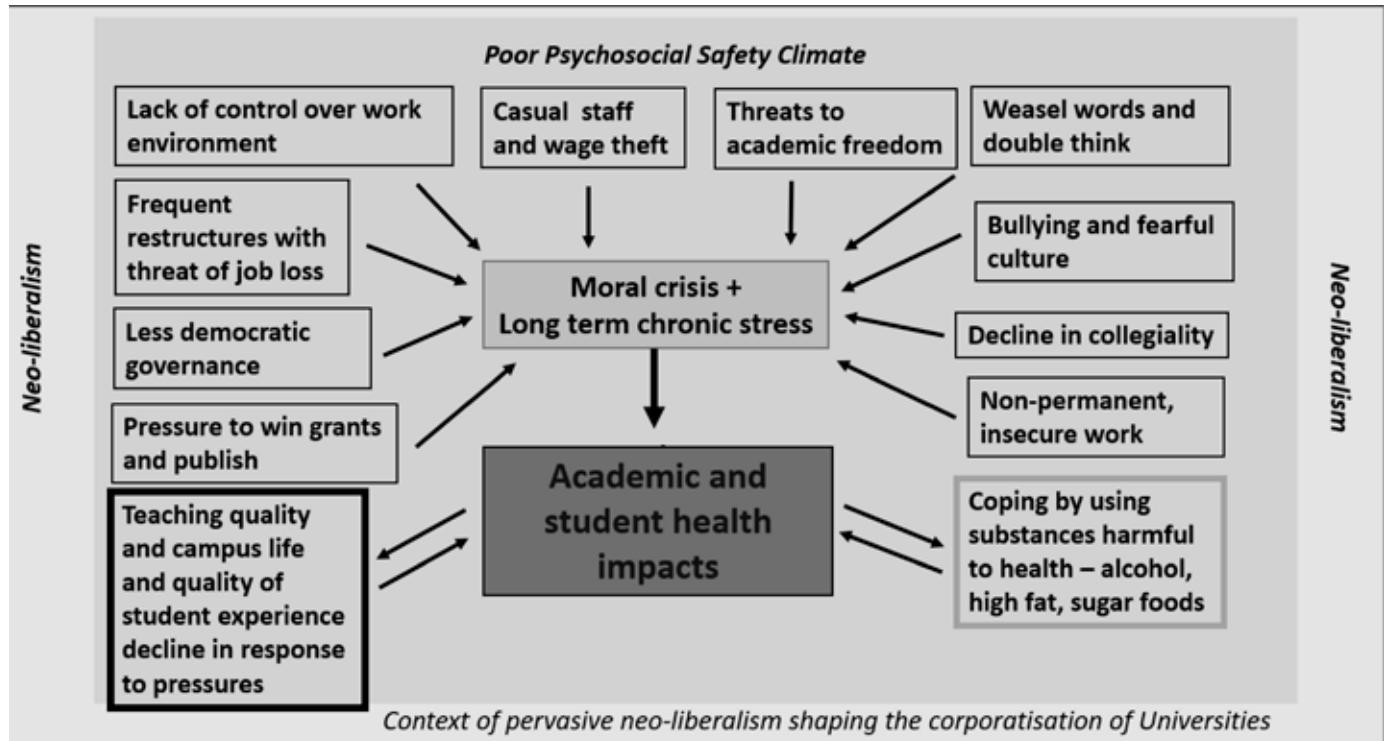
The combined impact of the factors identified above has the pernicious effect of creating a dilemmatic space for university staff. This notion comes from the work of Hoggett, Mayo, and Miller (Hoggett et al. 2009), who studied the tension for community development workers in the UK between being employed by the state while striving to support and advocate for people experiencing disadvantage. They emphasised that this did not lead to discrete, occasional dilemmas, but ongoing 'dilemmatic space' that workers had to constantly navigate, where their morals and values clashed with structural conditions. This constant need to navigate tension, and inability to act fully on values, affects workers' mental health – increasing job stress, anxiety, depression, despair, and burnout as

has been shown in varied settings (Freeman et al. 2017; Denton et al. 2002).

Thus, while all the changes described in the previous section have their separate impact on health there is also an overall effect, which means all the facets of the corporate university described in the previous section come together to create dilemmatic spaces in which to work, especially for those staff whose values are at odds with those typical of a corporatised university. Figure 1 demonstrates these many pathways from the features of Australian corporatised universities to health impacts. It also shows that many of these pathways lead to chronic long-term stress which creates mental and physical health problems.

While corporate managerial practices are widespread in many sectors, dilemmatic space can be particularly fraught for institutions that are intended to serve the public interest. The corporatised changes to the university system described above have led to disjunctions between many staff members' values and desire to do teaching and research for the public good, and the university's goals of international rankings, research income, high citation rates, increased numbers of international students and a reduction in teaching staff relative to student numbers. Academics are constantly being asked to be complicit in a brutalising system, and for many this means trading off their morals and values for better metrics to appease university management.

**Figure 1: Dilemmatic space of Australian university life and impact on health**



Dilemmatic space is increased when academics' values are incompatible with broader university actions, such as partnering with the Defence sector – touted as a solution for Australian universities to counter income lost during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ross 2021), accepting funding from mining magnates, pharmaceutical companies, and unethical ventures such as the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilization (Davies 2019) and Bjorn Lomborg's Copenhagen Consensus Centre (McGeough 2015). The corporatisation of universities means that universities willingly trade moral vision for this extra income, and a sense of social accountability and research for the public good has faded into background rhetoric at best.

Dilemmatic space may be particularly perilous for the health of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

academics because universities are such colonised and colonising institutions (Mukandi and Bond 2019; Thunig and Jones 2021). A review (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2011) of how effectively Australian universities had enabled Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander peoples' influence in governance systems suggest a majority of universities had not done well on this measure, with only ten achieving more than 50% representation. Another review (Behrendt et al. 2012) found insufficient progress in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and in recognising the value of Indigenous cultures to the knowledge base of universities. These reports also note the importance of culturally safe environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics. The failure to provide such environments leads to stress and takes a toll on the mental health of these academics. They face constant interpersonal and institutional

**Box 1: Two case examples of how psychosocial stress affects women academics**

***Emma***

Emma is a typical young researcher who sought help for chronic stress and burnout syndrome. She had suffered the uncertainty of precarious short-term contracts for years. She felt trapped by ongoing pressure to apply for grants and powerless in the face of her manager's demands to publish 'more', even though she was only part-time. She blamed herself for not coping and her worries kept her awake most nights, made her stomach very unsettled, and made her frequently irritable with her two young children, especially her son with a disability. Eventually she won a permanent balanced position involving teaching and research duties, but this only replaced the job uncertainty with an excessive student load that made it near-impossible to write grants and papers. In thankfulness for the permanent job, she felt she couldn't speak up about how all the pressures were seriously undermining her mental and physical health. Her GP recommended leave for recuperation and family time. But she was thrown into a panic attack when her leave was cut short by her manager who asked her to return to pick up an additional course because another staff member had just left. She was additionally frustrated that the department's male academics were never asked to do this.

***Anita***

Anita, a more experienced academic, had acute work-induced stress. She had started feeling anxious and at times totally overwhelmed and physically paralysed. She recently felt unable to decline involvement in more research projects as she hoped these would help her CV and h-index to remain competitive with the males in her department. She was cynical and resentful about how the university had changed in recent years, exhausting her and making her life 'nothing but work', with her weekends, evenings and annual leave spent on grant and paper writing as there was no other time. She was angry about all the unpaid hours she put in and was on the brink of quitting academia, even though she loved teaching and research and still held a faint glimmer of hope that university life might one day return to what it once was. Her stress was showing as a tense jaw, headaches, constricted breathing, and neck tightness. Her overwhelmed mind was severely reducing her research and publishing productivity and had recently led to some quite serious mistakes in her clinical work. Alongside emotional therapy, she had tried anti-anxiety medication for a short while, but it caused dizziness and other effects that interfered with her work.

racism, colonial logics, devaluing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and researching, and mismatches between grant and research timelines and the need to build trusting relationships, or between universities' emphasis on publications and research outcomes that are valued by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Aboriginal Scholar Chelsea Watego describes the institutional racism she experienced as a black academic and notes 'my health was profoundly affected and my five children deeply impacted' (Watego 2021) in her dealings with a corporatised, neoliberal and colonised university.

This constant traversal of dilemmatic space adds greater stress and mental ill health on top of other pressures such as growing job insecurity, increasing workload and output expectations, and lower grant success rates. Growing mental ill health in the university sector is also not equitably spread. For example, research has shown that women suffer health effects from overwork at lower work-hour thresholds than men because of their typically higher burdens of caring and domestic work outside

of employment (Dinh et al. 2017). There have been worsening gender disparities since COVID-19 in the sector (Johnston and Office of the Chief Scientist 2020; MacDonald 2020).

The net result of living in the dilemmatic space for many university academics is burnout, which the World Health Organization (WHO 2019) has defined as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. The WHO cites three key dimensions to burnout:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- increased mental distance from the job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism
- reduced professional efficacy.

The impact of such burnout on women is illustrated by the cases in Box 1. Universities typically refer staff who report stress to their Employee Assistance Programs but offer little other support. Many others take their burnout

#### **Box 2: Changes needed to make Australian universities healthier places to work and study**

Restore more democratic governance which will empower university staff and students including in membership of university councils and key committees and reduce the power of Executive Deans by mandating industrial democracy.

Have a vision for universities that sees them as engaging with a wide range of social and planetary issues rather than purely as a place to gain narrow job skills.

Ensure employment conditions for all staff support health and wellbeing and respect tenure.

Use measures such as psychosocial safety climate as KPIs to evaluate the performance of universities in achieving supportive environments.

Reduce the salaries of senior executive staff that are out of step with other public sector executive positions.

Ensure senior executive staff act to outlaw illegal practices such as underpayment and excessive hours and implement employment and health and safety legislation.

Encourage quality rather than quantity in academic publishing and value other impacts such as mentoring, participation in public debate, influence on Australian public policy and professional practice and community engagement.

Address ongoing institutional racism, gender inequities, and other barriers to inclusion in universities for staff and students.

Ensure the university provides a culturally safe workplace for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders academics and students and is welcoming to all people, especially those from a lower socio-economic background and/or from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Improve the quality of students' learning experience by ensuring teaching academics have secure employment conditions, are qualified in the areas they are teaching and do not have excessive workloads.

stress to their GPs, psychiatrists, therapists or try to cope alone using mindfulness and physical therapies such as yoga. Each of these measures externalises the costs of dealing with the stresses created by universities. These responses individualise the problem and ignore the many structural issues that lie at the heart of why academics are a particularly stressed group of employees. Changes are needed in all aspects of Australian operations including Federal government support for universities, governance, styles of management, employment practices, erosion of collegiate cultures and unrealistic workloads and expectation of performance.

### **Healthy Universities**

Healthy universities need to provide an organisational environment in which people are not exposed to the chronic stressors we have identified above. Our experience and the evidence from considered accounts (Connell 2019; Sims 2020; Smyth 2017) indicate that academics want to feel more in control, happier at work and home, calmer, to have time to think, clarity to prioritise work, brain-space to be innovative and creative, and time to take pleasure in a job well-done.

The changes required are not services that respond to the distress of individual academics. Rather, structural changes are required in the way universities are governed, managed and envisioned so that staff are well supported in workplaces which rank high on psychosocial safety. The changes we list in Box 2 are likely to make universities healthier places to work.

### **Conclusion**

Our article documents the poor psycho-social health status of staff at Australian universities. We also point to the characteristics of these corporate universities that make them unhealthy places to work at, showing that these structural factors are having a strongly negative impact on academics' health. Universities should be the powerhouses of new ideas, innovation, experimentation and radical thinking. Yet such are the pressures faced by university staff that many have little time to do more than keep their head above the rising tide of higher teaching loads, and pressures to publish and win grants. This situation is far from the public good role previously envisaged for universities. Instead, the corporate university is dumbing down standards and creating universities that are more full of fear and stress than of cutting edge ideas and visions for the future of Australian society.

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**Notes:**

\* This article has been written in dialogue with – and in connection to – all other themed articles within this special issue. As a result, it is best read as part of the issue as a whole.

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**Equatorial**

Aspirin fizzing in a tall glass  
a summer kimono and Kafka,  
a view of the rainforest  
from the balcony wicker chairs.

The fruit bats come at night.  
So what if we never sleep.  
Always the flash of light will fade  
into an overcast sky.

The waves crash, the parrots talk.  
So what if I broke the door.  
We never sleep. Always the sky  
will flash and fade into a night

that is too heavy to bear. So what  
if you've got me on the run. I told you,  
*the nights will be too short*. I said,  
*we cannot live inside a gaze*.

GEMMA PARKER

**Double edged**

Knives grew from stone shards and sharp sticks  
fractured bone or sparking flit, they served  
the caveman's hand, the surgeon's art, the thug's thrust.  
Knives cut umbilical cords and severed jugulars  
freed the wrists of bound prisoners  
and cut soft necks like buttered bread.

Pen knife, claymore, epee or machete,  
a bone-handled fruit knife in a white-gloved hand  
or a gentleman's letter opener, blunt  
as the words that can cut through a crowd...  
*He's got a knife!* someone yells, and everyone runs.

Knives scratch fear into fiction  
from Shakespeare to Stephen King  
bring bloodied images of rippers,  
stabbers, slashers and clowns.  
But most knives remain our friends,  
our slaves, carving, peeling, skinning  
or simply falling into line beside a fork.  
Murderous knives are merely sharp leaves  
on the tree of right and wrong.

JUDE AQUILINA

# Over the horizon: Is there an alternative to neoliberal university governance?\*

RICHARD HIL, FERN THOMPSETT AND KRISTEN LYONS<sup>2</sup>

*This article outlines many of the problems and challenges pervading governance regimes in neoliberal universities. Attention is drawn to the various ways in which the modern university has over recent decades concentrated power in the hands of a business-oriented managerial elite, thereby eroding active involvement of academics, students and the wider public in decision-making processes. Despite various attempts to reform and restructure university governance, we argue that entirely new, democratic and inclusive modalities of governance should be considered, and that much can be learned from progressive governance regimes around the world. Ultimately, changes to institutional governance are reimaged in an effort to render universities more relevant and responsive to the global crisis we now face. This requires a radical break from market-oriented neoliberal agendas and the governance regimes they foster.*

**KEYWORDS:** Neoliberalism, governance, managerialism, public management, the manageriat, democratic governance, inclusion, re-form not reform.

## Introduction

The governance of contemporary universities has altered dramatically over recent decades. Despite their variegated nature across the Anglosphere, it has become apparent that universities have developed a range of common organisational features that distinguish them from those in previous eras (Roland 2017). Notwithstanding the obvious shortcomings of university arrangements in earlier times – the patriarchal, culturally homogenous and class-oriented nature of governance – academics and students tended to play a more prominent role in institutional affairs, and there was certainly a greater degree of intra and interdisciplinary collegiality (Sims 2019; Thornton 2016). As we argue below, the adoption of corporate business models and public management principles in the tertiary sector has led, among other things, to less collegial, more hierarchically organised and somewhat elitist management structures, giving rise to a range of deleterious consequences – as noted throughout this special issue.

And yet, as we further contend, numerous historical and contemporary examples of alternative forms of governance signal the possibilities of more inclusive, collegial and democratic management regimes. Implicitly, we reject the view that because of their size and complexity universities today should be governed chiefly by highly paid, specialised executives who are increasingly distanced from the concerns and influences of academics, students and the wider community. We

consider this a smokescreen that not only eschews the problems associated with the modern university, but also denies the possibility of radically alternative modes of university governance.

Our argument for a different approach to university governance is made not simply on the basis of the specific operational functions of the contemporary university, but rather on grounds of principle and, to a significant extent, efficacy. Put simply, the university ‘belongs’ to a broad constituency made up, yes, of accountable ‘managers’, but also of academics, professional and other staff, students and the broader community. As such, more effective and democratic ways need to be found to build open, inclusive and accountable governance regimes that reflect the diverse views, opinions and expertise of all stakeholders.

## Governance and Power Concentration

So, why does the nature of university governance matter? Clearly, the ways in which universities are governed – and how students, academics, administrators and managers govern themselves – tells us a good deal about the inner workings of such institutions. Particular configurations of governance reflect the operational practices, value orientations and power structures that reside within each institution, although the spread of managerialism, as noted in earlier articles in this issue,

has ensured a significant degree of sectoral uniformity and concentrated managerial power (Sims 2019). The reproduction of such power occurs through a variety of means: from the assertion of 'specialised' managerial knowledge and particular recruitment policies, through to the disciplining practices that define the scope and limits of governmental regulation (Bevir 2011; Connell 2019; Rea 2016). Governance regimes in today's universities have evolved to meet the demands set by 'industry needs' and a commercialised global education market, resulting in significant changes to organisational cultures and how various actors come to understand their roles and responsibilities in what is now widely considered a business enterprise (Morrissey 2013).

This has resulted, as set out in earlier articles, in a significant shift of power from academics and students to a new commercially-minded managerial class with unprecedented authority, and, as Margaret Sims suggests in this issue, a growing disconnection from the academic workforce. The proposition, however, that top-down governance is the most efficient and effective means of overseeing institutional affairs is, as noted, highly questionable, particularly given the maladministration, inequities, divisions and discontents that now scar the tertiary system (see articles in this issue, and Smyth 2017; Sims 2020).

The concentration of power among the 'manageriat' (Watts 2017: 17) is anchored in and expressed through the adoption of various business models whose modus operandi is directed at maximising market share in a system where public funding has diminished significantly over recent years (Gerber 2015; Lucas et al. 2020). This business orientation is evidenced in the composition of university councils, as well as in the appointment of vice chancellors, chancellors, senior managers, marketing specialists, management consultants and so forth, increasingly from unrelated business backgrounds (Schroder-Turk 2021; Sims 2019; Doran 2016). While academics continue to be appointed to senior management positions, they find themselves, as Sims points out, in a cultural context defined primarily by market imperatives and brand-conscious corporate power.

Managerialism, the organisational ideology which insists that it is only through skilled, specialised and rational management practices that good corporate governance can be achieved (Thornton 2016), has proven a convenient means of enabling business models to flourish in today's universities, redirecting power and influence upwards, as well as redefining what academics do and how they come to view the nature and scope of their roles (Shepherd 2017). Despite such changes,

some things remain remarkably the same – especially when it comes to who does the governing. As noted by Croucher (2020) and Devlin (2021), the composition of senior management continues to reflect the skewed cultural homogeneity that has endured for decades, thereby reproducing self-referential and narrowly defined governance regimes. Current configurations of power in the modern university, therefore, have many far-reaching consequences in terms of strategic directions, staff composition, pedagogical orientations, and educational and research outcomes. The marginalisation of academics and students in this context is no accident: it reflects the logic of a system in which policy decisions are increasingly restricted to managerial 'experts'. There is nothing natural or given about this. Indeed, there are many examples, both historical and current, of radically different and more democratic university governance systems around the world. The University of Bologna offers an interesting early European example of how governance arrangements were shaped, in this case, by radical student involvement.

### Bologna's Legacy

The origins of the University of Bologna are complex, and somewhat contested. It evolved from the eleventh century through a student-master tutelage system in which students studied a variety of academic subjects relating to seven *artes liberales* which consisted of philosophy and formed the basis of the undergraduate Bachelor degree before anybody proceeded to a higher degree in Theology, Law, or Medicine.

There were in fact several 'universities' which were first established among law students around the beginning of the thirteenth century: one was comprised of Italian students (excluding the Bolognese), a second by foreign law students, and later, a third, comprising students from all of the other faculties or discipline areas. Each of these was headed by a rector, usually a priest, regularly elected by the students. This model was imitated and adapted throughout Europe, and came to be applied generically to the students and academics of each university foundation. It is worth emphasising that the term 'university' originally meant the student body. The law Masters organised themselves into two colleges, one for secular studies and the other for canon law, along the lines of the guild model. All of these structural and procedural elements continued to evolve and become more institutionalised over the following centuries.

The genealogy of the early years of the University resembles less a formal, top-heavy institution that simply recruited students, and more an assembly of student guilds gradually collectivising into what they came to call a university, which students could organise largely

on their own terms (Hyde 1972). Student guilds were remarkably similar to what we now understand as mutual aid societies, whereby participants worked together to create and maintain systems to support everyone's needs, from scholarly pursuits to day-to-day living. Students sought out and remunerated their professors. Such arrangements continued until the municipality assumed primary responsibility for paying professors in the fourteenth century (Hyde 1972; Lines 2017).

Interestingly, the power of Bolognese student guilds extended beyond the University to various civic and political fora within the city. Not unlike modern-day trade unions, students would strike in opposition to decisions made by Bologna's political class – a tactic which, given their financial contributions to the city, tended to be extremely effective. By 1250, students at the University were considered citizens of Bologna with rights to participate in civic governance by virtue of their student status alone (Carlsmith 2013; Lines 2017).

For all its shortcomings – a male-dominated system that until the thirteenth century excluded women and featured rigid disciplinary, status-conscious structures – the University of Bologna revealed an interesting imaginary around governance arrangements. Many aspects of the open and transparent spirit that inhabited the University are replicated today in other Italian institutions, like the University of Torino, where governance protocols set out in its statement of 'General Principles' state its commitment to being a transparent, public entity; noting for example that the meetings of its Collegial Bodies are avowedly public. These principles also specify that the University respects pluralism and safeguards 'the principle of independence from all religious, ideological, political and economic conditioning'. Most pertinently perhaps, the origin story of the University of Bologna indicates that neoliberal governance regimes, far from being inevitable, are, if anything, antithetical to the wellspring in which universities emerged in continental Europe. While elements of the Bologna initiative are apparent in many of today's European universities, some of the most radical expressions of non-hierarchical governance also occurred centuries later in Latin America – which, like other parts of the world, often escapes the attention of Western observers.

### 'Co-governance': Latin America Departures

University 'co-government' originated in Argentina in 1918, later spreading throughout Latin America. Students drove this reform which included, *inter alia*, a communitarian structure in which academics, students and alumni formed tripartite governance bodies to preside over curriculum development. 'Free teaching' was also promoted to ensure diverse pedagogies, appointments,

and measures to bolster academic freedom, open access, and institutional independence. University councils – in which academics, students and alumni occupied key roles – oversaw tuition-free education and expanded access for those traditionally marginalised in higher education, such as poor and working-class people, Indigenous people, women and ethnic minorities. Equally vital were the roles that university affiliates played in the wider political realm; students and academics featured prominently in various liberationist protest movements, often pitted against repressive governments.

Proponents of the Argentinian model urged that, 'the university should breed positive political socialization for democratic norms, participation, trust, tolerance, the practice of negotiation and compromise – in short a democratic political culture' (Levy 2013: np). In effect, the university was to become the prefigurative enabler of communitarian and democratic organisation, while partnering with other institutions and civic organisations in wider political struggles. Although many universities across Latin America came to suffer the same fate as those in Argentina today – low academic pay, poor conditions, deteriorating quality of teaching and research (Sundquist 2011) – co-governance illustrated the remarkable possibilities afforded through more inclusive management arrangements. This drive for more inclusive systems of university governance also emerged in the 1960s, especially in the north of America and many parts of Europe, as part of a 'counter-cultural' resistance to capitalistic state power and authority.

### Counter-Cultural and Cooperative Institutional Governance

It was during this period that academics and students, often as participants in protest movements and local activist struggles, sought to engage new ways of thinking about curricula, research and governance (Horowitz 1986; Pellew and Taylor 2020; Rogers 2008). Resistance to the 'military industrial complex' percolated into higher education sectors in the US, Canada, England and to a lesser extent, Australia and New Zealand, as students and academics pursued alternative ways of structuring university affairs (Rodriguez-Amat and Jeffrey 2017). Efforts were made to break down boundaries between educators and students, dismantle hierarchical administrative structures, and encourage interdisciplinary work rather than over-specialisation (Pellew and Taylor 2020). Energy was also put into bolstering the liberal arts and creating communities of learning that encouraged connection, knowledge sharing, co-inquiry, critical exploration and interdisciplinarity. Generally, senior management in such places welcomed student participation in university fora, inviting them also to join political organisations on campus – these days regarded

as an anathema in the university sector. Student unions, associations and guilds were prominent in shaping relations within the academy, advocating on student issues, addressing grievances and securing a greater say in university affairs.

Predictably, perhaps, when set against the emergence of neoliberalism during the late 1970s, a price was paid for such radicalism. The participation of academics and students in anti-war, civil rights, women's rights and other protest movements in the US and elsewhere, along with students' ongoing influence in what was taught and how institutions were governed, led to a backlash. State policies increasingly curtailed the power and reach of student organisations, and in a variety of ways, eroded academic autonomy (Barrigos 2014). Academic activism was further constrained by the neoliberal university's focus on instrumentalised ends: producing 'job ready' graduates to meet 'industry needs', as well as the introduction of regulatory regimes obsessed with performance targets and rankings (Joseph 2015; Meyer 2002).

As time went on, the revolutionary changes in university governance in the 1960s and thereafter – certainly up to the late 1970s – were gradually superseded by forms of institutional hierarchy that increasingly confined decision-making to managerial elites. Perhaps not surprisingly, the limits imposed on academic participation in institutional governance created fertile ground for cynicism and disengagement, a phenomenon more widely evident in the political cultures of western democracies, which over recent decades have experienced a 'democracy recession' (Diamond 2015). For Henry Giroux (2002), the centralisation of university governance reinforced the competition and individualism characteristic of the neoliberal state, thereby shifting institutional practices from previously more participatory organisational cultures to centralised regimes of corporate control.

In the face of growing tensions and disillusionment with the neoliberal university, particularly in relation to governance, many academics and students have begun to turn their attention to educational initiatives outside the formal academy. Free universities, progressive colleges, anti-colonial, liberationist, Buddhist and Indigenous institutions may reflect more inclusive and communitarian approaches to education and governance. For instance, in the US today, there are numerous higher education colleges that reflect the genealogy of cultural resistance to neoliberal educational hegemony. Horizontally-structured, democratised institutions abound, such as Deep Springs College, California, where students are actively involved in decisions relating to admissions, curriculum development, and appointment of academic staff; Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts (the 'New School') in New York,

where ground-breaking academic course offerings stem from student participation in curriculum planning; Pitzer College in California, a liberal arts establishment where members of the Student Senate play a mandated role across a range of committees; or Hampshire College in Massachusetts, where students are directly involved in curriculum development and college policy, resulting in 2004 in the student-led 're-radicalisation' of the college to maintain its reputation as an innovative, alternative educational institution. Governance regimes in such settings emerge partly from the desire to break with dominant power relations, and to carve out spaces for creative thinking and experimentation.

Another example of this break with neoliberal hegemony is the Social Science Centre (SSC) which emerged in 2010–2011 in England. Its founders – academics, students and political activists – took particular issue with the UK's then Conservative government decision to defund the social sciences at the tertiary level on the basis of its re-classification as a 'non-essential' field of study. Far from an isolated event, this decision was, according to its critics, part of an established trend whereby universities were 'impoverished by a system of higher education that is increasingly oriented towards satisfying the perceived needs of business and industry, and that embraces the short-termist, highly competitive, profit-driven motives of the capitalist market' (Social Science Centre 2011: np). While resistance to these changes on the 'inside' of tertiary institutions was (and remains) intense, the SSC's founders were equally motivated to create autonomous spaces of teaching and learning 'outside' conventional universities, primarily as a means of experimenting with more radical governance possibilities.

The SSC formed as a co-operative: a model of governance which, as founding members Mike Neary and Joss Winn explain, turned on principles of 'democracy, equality, equity and solidarity' (Neary and Winn 2017: 87). These helped ensure that all members had equal ownership of and influence over the Centre's affairs, which were decided at open general meetings. Participation in the SSC was essentially free of charge. Funds required by the Centre – largely for publicity and resources – were sourced through member contributions equivalent to one hour of their monthly income if they were employed, and nothing if they were unemployed or otherwise unable to contribute financially. No one received payment for their labour or time; funds were all reinvested in the project's general operations (Withers 2014: 49).

One of the SSC's founding principles was that 'students and teachers have much to learn from one another' (Members of the Social Science Centre 2013: 66). Indeed, the SSC referred to all of its members as 'scholars'

which broke down the distinction between teachers and students. Members worked collegially to design courses, all of which were 'participative and collaborative in order to ground inquiry in the experiences and knowledges of the participants' (Social Science Centre 2011: np). Courses were fashioned in the crucible of the broader community and wider socio-political relations that animated frameworks of 'militant enquiry or co-research' (Neary cited in Class War University 2013: np).

Not only did this pedagogical model dismantle distinctions between teachers and students; it also dissolved the boundary between the 'inside' or 'outside' of a scholarly institution, instead working towards what Gigi Roggero has referred to as an 'institution of the commons' (Class War University 2013: np). Indeed, the SSC forged relationships across a varied ecology of social justice and mutual aid projects – with those supporting unhoused people to anarchist hackers, free universities, and even workers and academics 'on the inside' of universities – and mobilised community engagement with and for these connected groups. For the SSC, developing and supporting 'the commons' constituted both the means and the ends of study – or, as one participant put it, 'care for others can itself be pedagogic' (in Neary and Winn 2017: 99).

The SSC's vision was radical. As founding member Mike Neary stated: 'The SSC is not a demand for the state to provide higher education, but a recognition that revolutionary education cannot be provided by the capitalist state; and, therefore, we have no other option but to establish our own necessary revolutionary alternative form of higher education' (Class War University 2013: np). After eight years of operation, however, the SSC's members reached the limit of what they were able to achieve through their operational model, and the Centre closed its doors in 2019. Running the Centre demanded more time and effort than its core participants could offer without financial compensation. At the time of writing, several of the SSC's members are extending the experiment to a different model; one which can better support its workers in material terms.

The SSC's core values and governance structures however, are ongoing success stories, having inspired projects, practices and pedagogies beyond the SSC itself. There have been growing calls within the academy for the democratisation of university governance structures along similar lines. A number of institutions, like the University of New Hampshire and Colgate University in the US, have sought to instigate changes toward radical inclusivity, thereby building more participatory institutions that resemble the co-governance and co-operative models that have existed elsewhere.

## Toward Democratic Governance?

Movements toward more open, transparent and democratic forms of university governance are, as we have indicated, far from new. Their origins rest in some of the earliest tertiary institutions in Europe as well as in many other parts of the world. The inclusion of academics, students, and the wider community in university affairs is considered, in these instances, as vital for the open and accountable public governance of institutions. The concentration of power in the hands of management experts is but one manifestation of governance that has led to considerable discontent within universities as well as growing secrecy and general lack of transparency.

In a National Tertiary Education Union report (NTEU 2017), union members with experience of university councils – one of the most important decision-making bodies in the contemporary university – observed an array of procedural problems with a direct bearing on how such fora operate – for example, lack of transparency in Council deliberations with proceedings not open to observers, and non-reporting of commercial-in-confidence or highly sensitive matters. Such practices, along with more routinized concerns over the exercise of corporate power for largely commercial and revenue-raising ends, has understandably drawn public concern as well as calls for a radical overhaul of university governance arrangements.

In addressing these and other matters in Australia, consideration has been given to the notion of 'trusteeship' – that is, the involvement of academic staff and others in shaping policy and other institutional affairs, rather than leaving this largely in the hands of executives. Corporate governance is seen in many quarters as too specialised and restrictive, excluding the majority of those who actually work in the academy.

The fact is, however, that managerialism, and the elitist effects it manifests, exists precisely to maintain corporate structures that are regarded by policy mandarins and university chiefs as essential to institutional success in the global education market. Appealing though it might sound, 'trusteeship' in and of itself is unlikely to gain traction in a system whose managerial ethos and corporate goals are so intimately bound up with market-oriented ends. Indeed, the invitation by management to cede power in order to attain a more inclusive, democratic governance regime appears at odds with the general policy frameworks that require universities to operate as businesses.

Such obstacles have not dissuaded others from urging internal governance reforms. For instance, in arguing for the possibility of a 'democratic university', Australian academic Jean-Paul Gagnon (2020: np) suggests a 'tricameral system' of governance made

up of representative ‘houses’, each of which would be composed of a broad cross-section of students, faculty members at all levels, and external stakeholders – family, friends, alumni, business and social organisation representatives, and local community members. ‘Houses’, Gagnon proposes, ‘would be rotated annually; members would serve non-consecutive terms; participation – the choice to ‘opt in’ or out – would be voluntary’ (Gagnon 2020: np). Each house would be represented in a broader executive body comprised of house volunteers. With appropriate funding, Gagnon insists, this model could work to offset the somewhat exclusionary fora, like Councils, that now make up neoliberal university governance systems.

And yet, such proposals once again brush up against the same problems alluded to above, not least the intrinsic connection between managerial power and the policy frameworks that support it. Predictably, this invites a different conversation about how university governance arrangements might be transformed, or *re-formed*, rather than simply reformed. This requires us to go ‘upstream’ to critically dismantle and replace the values that underpin universities, and to offer a vision of a very different kind of system that takes stock of these institutions in the context of intersecting global crises and the sorts of teaching and research we need in this existential context. Simply tinkering at the edges of reform will not cut it.

But we have to start somewhere, and that discursive space may well be in what is already occurring in and around the edges of higher education. The process of divesting from the enclosure of neoliberal governance is already underway both in terms of the cross-cultural examples of alternative governance regimes as well as in what occurs (often against the institutional grain) in countries like Australia. As Emeritus Professor Raewyn Connell points out in her interview for this special issue:

We know lots of ways to run organizations more democratically. Universities have experience with them! They include circulation of leadership, decentralization of power, deliberative bodies, election of representatives, participatory decision-making, inclusive discussions of policy... The crucial thing is to make democracy normal. It can sound a bit strenuous. But I’m sure that once established, it will take up less time than the current system of surveillance, hierarchy, box-ticking, reporting, restructuring and anxious compliance with unending, badly-written directives from above.

Others have proposed a more decidedly ‘civic agenda’ (Dickinson 2020: np) akin to the SSC’s model based on workers’ co-operatives (Winn 2015). These solutions

would be more inclusive of academics, students and members of the community at each level of university governance, with all participants having a stake in the ‘ownership’ of the institution. In effect, this would involve shifting away from a concentration of power in boards, senates and councils that make decisions on behalf of all stakeholders, sometimes in secret, and without proper consultation.

Whatever system we might pursue, governance should not be the preserve of a managerial elite, nor should it be secretive or simply tethered to commercial interests. Academics, students and the wider public should have a direct influence on policy directions, ideally anchoring them in social justice and human rights principles that are cognizant of human need in the face of escalating global crises. A truly democratic university, guided by such principles, would prefigure the sort of active, participatory citizenship that is needed now more than ever. To continue along the current managerialist path is to consign universities to historical irrelevance.

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#### Notes:

\* This article has been written in dialogue with – and in connection to – all other themed articles within this special issue. As a result, it is best read as part of the issue as a whole.

1. Large parts of this article are drawn from *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis: A University for the Common Good* by Richard Hil, Kristen Lyons and Fern Thompsett. The book was published late last year by Routledge, London.

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# Academic Leadership in a Neoliberal Managerial World: An autoethnography of my career

MARGARET SIMS

In this paper I am going to tell a story based on my own experiences, so in a sense this is an autoethnography. However, in order to protect the identities of the people and organisations involved in my story I am combining events that happened with different people, in different places, and over different time periods into one story. In that sense my story is fiction despite the reality of each individual experience I have used to craft the whole. I want to use my experiences as told in this story to illustrate what I believe are key elements of the neoliberal take-over of higher education, with a focus on the neoliberal shaping of academic leadership. In doing so, I will use the theoretical framework developed in my recent book (Sims 2020) to analyse my experiences so as to link my understandings with the work of others and to situate my thinking in the extant literature.

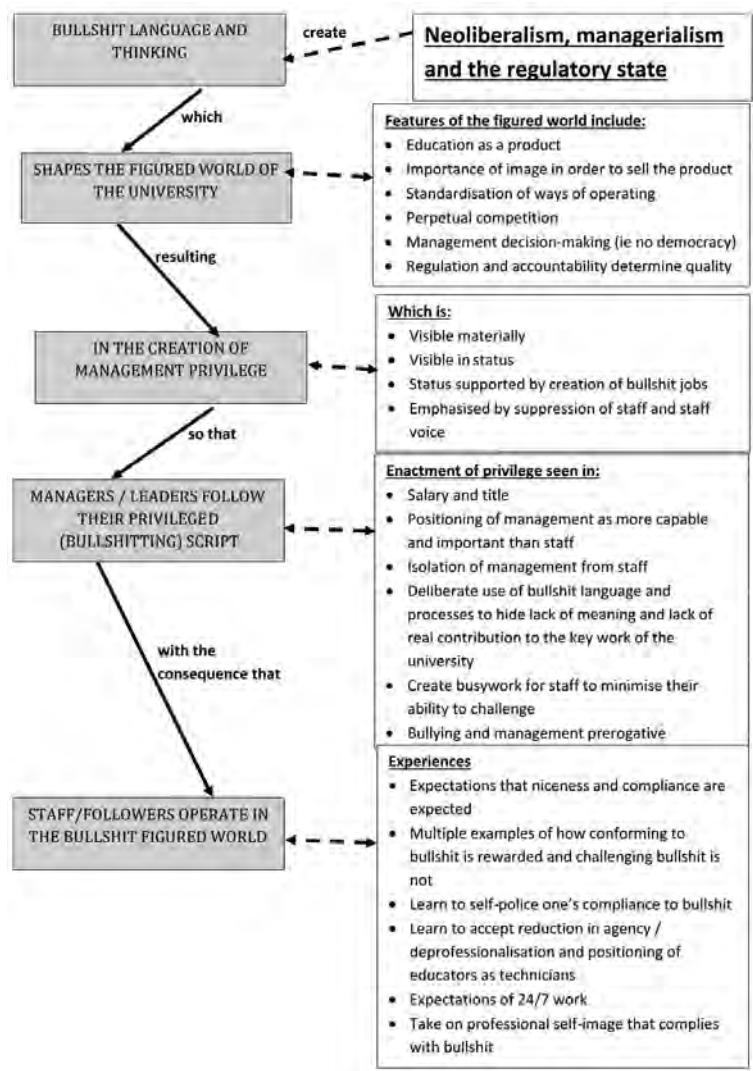
As this is not a traditional paper, I am not going to start with a literature review. I take great care in shaping my story that I report only on the public actions of others and my feelings in relation to those actions. In addition, I shape my story by collating actions of different people, acting in different organisations and over a wide time period, creating a fictional character, Chris, whose actions are this compilation. This artificial collation of events means that any individual who has interacted with me at any point throughout my career in academia cannot be identified. To add further anonymity, I have chosen a gender-neutral name for the constructed actor, Chris, I have used in my story.

My autoethnography in this story is underpinned by a social constructivist ontology where the key task I face is the interpretation of my reality. I am assuming there is some underlying meaning to my experiences that appropriate reflection can help both myself and my readers to understand. Once this understanding is developed, it can be used to suggest potential strategies for change. In a sense this is the key element of the work of Freire (1973) who suggested that the powerful are able to impose their version of reality onto others who then come to accept their position as oppressed and powerless as the natural order of things. I am suggesting that neoliberalism, as an ideology, imposes a version of reality upon, in my story, the world of higher education. This version of neoliberal reality crafts roles that those who are successful need to play, and play well, to maintain their positions of power.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me begin my story.

For some time now I have been acting in a formal management role as the head of the work unit in which my colleagues and I are placed and was asked to apply for the substantive position. I refused for a range of reasons that my immediate supervisor dismissed contemptuously (and subsequently refused to have anything to do with me). It seemed to me that there was a growing expectation

**Figure 1: Neoliberal managerialism creates a figured world in which we operate. (Framework copied from Sims, 2020)**



that managers distance themselves from the workers in their unit, and I had seen a number of appointments of managers from outside the higher education sector who applied general management principles to their work without understanding the context. I did not agree with this approach as I thought my role as a manager was to deal with all the management bullshit in order to create space for my colleagues to do the important work of teaching and research. It seemed to me that increasingly the management role was expected to create more management bullshit that actually got in the way of the real work of academia. After fighting this tension for far too many years I resolved not to put myself in that position ever again. Thus, I changed positions and locations but, despite this, after a time found myself acting in a management role but refusing to tow the line and move into the big building, refusing to isolate myself from the colleagues and friends with whom I regularly socialised, and refusing to change the way I dressed and performed in the workplace. I felt (and continue to believe) that true leadership is about being accessible to colleagues, providing support at the right time and in the right way (often through informal conversations such as mine with Chris at the pub), validating the strengths each person possesses and creating teams where the strengths of members support each other and weaknesses are supported by the strength of others.

My reflections about the way I perceived the manager's role and how I had seen it change over time, and my personal focus on social constructivism as a way of looking at the world led me to investigate what I saw as the key ideology responsible for creating a context (I will use the term figured world as defined by Holland et al. 1998, to refer to this context); the ideology I call neoliberalism. Neoliberalism offers a way of looking at the world that legitimises ideas such as the importance of individualism, competition, privilege and the inevitability of inequity (see Sims 2020). In other words, the strategies that are used in the business world aimed at making organisations more efficient at delivering product to customers are positioned as being appropriate for all organisations including those in the service areas (Davis 2017). Putting these ideas into practice in higher education creates a figured world where management positions are deemed more important than academic roles (as evidenced by the significant pay disparities between top academic positions and top management positions like Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors – see Ross 2019, 2020). This is accompanied by the idea that management itself is a set of skills and behaviours separate from the context in which they are enacted, and therefore 'pure' management is best operationalised at some distance from those who are being managed (Brennan and Zipin 2019; Connell 2019, Hil 2012).

*Chris decided to apply for the management role in which I had been acting. We had several conversations over the next few days about the application. A number of*

*colleagues responded positively to Chris' intention and offered support. Chris was part of our group, was a sound academic and people said they thought s/he would be a good manager. There was a feeling that, having come through the ranks, Chris understood the issues, the reality of the workplace and therefore would be in a good position to make effective and practical decisions. I hesitated to share with Chris my misgivings about how the role had impacted on me and the challenges I had experienced in remaining true to myself. In hindsight, perhaps I should have had this difficult conversation, but at the time I thought I was doing the right thing in supporting Chris without biasing her/him about the role and the pressures that came with it.*

*Chris went through the application process and was appointed into the role. I gladly stepped down and began to untangle myself from the various committees and positions I had in an attempt to give Chris the opportunity to grow into the role in a way that suited his/her strengths. I felt it inappropriate to have me constantly peering over his/her shoulder. Chris settled into the big building and for a while, things continued much as before. Gradually Chris socialised less and less with our group. I heard that s/he had been told that socialising with those s/he was supervising was inappropriate. Eventually we never saw Chris around – s/he was always in meetings or in an office guarded by a watchdog who did not allow anyone in without an appointment.*

*Chris appointed another layer of management between him/her and staff in the work unit. These appointments (who were existing academic staff who had teaching relief in order to undertake their management roles) meant that workload pressure increased as extant staff needed to cover their workload relief. Multiple working parties were set up by Chris to investigate various workload models and each group was briefed with the same imperative – we had to find ways to increase workload because the work unit was constantly having budget allocation cut by the university executive. At the same time there were increasing demands sent down by Chris, filtered through his/her assistants, for more accountability, more 'paperwork' to demonstrate we were doing the job for which we were paid, more standardisation measures so that our teaching all looked the same and more demands for research output which had to be published in (an external definition of) high quality journals. Coupled with this were external accreditation requirements for the courses we were teaching, and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency requirements identified as quality control measures to ensure that we were all doing the right thing. Chris did not appear to interpret these requirements, modify them to suit our context, nor even question them. Requirement after requirement was simply sent down the email chain (some contradictory, and most unclear) with the expectation that academic staff would comply. I remember one occasion when Chris*

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*demanded we all take on additional marking load for work that was not recognised in our workload and thus needed to be undertaken on top of a normal full workload. The 'reward' for this additional work was the kudos we could supposedly feel in providing 'service'.*

The growing gap between academics and management, and the increasing isolation of management from the real work of academia leads to escalating distrust. As Kenway et al. (2015: 266) claim, workers tend to perceive managers as secure in their 'well-renumerated privilege' whilst 'nonetheless busily engaged in merciless practices of "cutting" and "tightening".' Neoliberal demands for accountability create a figured world where managers are expected to provide evidence that workers are doing their jobs, and, at the same time, are willing to continue to improve their performance. In higher education this is reflected in the growing formalisation of performance management systems which increasingly result in excess busywork for academics who are required to demonstrate (with evidence) how everything they do is linked to the strategic plans of their work unit as well as to the university as a whole. Such systems continue to undermine academic agency and impose greater and greater levels of management control (University of Aberdeen 2016). As Morrish (2017: 2) argues, this 'scrutiny creates a hostile environment for academic freedom' and 'construct[s] academics as liabilities, not as creative institutional asset[s]'.

*Chris continued to be more and more isolated from academic staff in the work unit. Demands for performance improvements started to become unrealistic. For example, a colleague with a strong accent who had chosen to offer additional online interactive sessions with students (work above and beyond the extant expectations for teaching) was reprimanded because not all students could understand the way this colleague spoke (English was not this colleague's first language). Supervisor reports – a required part of promotion applications – began to include incorrect information for some staff. Other staff were instructed to go online and audit online teaching materials without informing the academic who developed these and was teaching them. New academic staff were failing to have their probation successfully completed if they were not teaching at the absolute ceiling of workload and, at the same time, achieving at least two publications a year in A\* journals. Academics were arbitrarily removed from higher degree supervision teams without their consent and with no reason given. Some staff were given approval to attend conferences when other staff were not, with no apparent differences in their rights to do so. Annual leave applications needed increasing justification, despite the right to leave being enshrined in legislation: approvals were not always granted and there was an attempt to limit annual leave to non-teaching times only. Any kind of leave increasingly required an identification of who was covering all elements of work during the absence on*

*leave. At one point I was refused leave until I nominated who was covering my teaching in a period when I was not teaching! Emails intruded into all parts of our lives: we were expected to be available electronically at all times and those who did not respond in a few hours (even when emails were sent at night or over the weekends) were reprimanded. The tone of emails changed and became more demanding, whilst at the same time providing patronising and bullshit explanations. I got to the point where, had I read bullshit phrases (quality teaching is important; you need to work smarter not harder) just one more time I wanted to scream.*

These experiences led me to the concept of bullshit language. Bullshit was first identified in the academic literature by Frankfurt (2005) and has increasingly become to be recognised as a form of words that sound wonderful but in fact have very little (or even no) meaning behind them (Christensen et al. 2019; Contandriopoulos 2019). Bullshit may even include 'mis-representation, half-truths and outrageous lies', all signals of post-truth (Ball 2017:5). I argue that bullshit language has an important function, that of demonstrating belonging to a neoliberal managerial power group. Bullshit language thus is not only the enactment of neoliberal managerial views, it plays a key role in 'bringing about things named and so plays a vital role in constructing the said world' (Watts 2017:114). Under neoliberal ideology, certain management behaviours are expected, and bullshit is the language that best functions to justify those behaviours, and in doing so, demonstrate clearly one's right to belong to the management group (the group of privilege). Bullshit is signalling language, (Spicer 2018: 11), functioning rather like a 'linguistic barbed wire fence' that creates a safe space for those enclosed, and a barrier to prevent those outside (who are not as fluent in bullshit) from reaching in. The use of bullshit language allows the speaker to share the nonsensical and meaningless phrases beloved by those following neoliberal managerialism without requiring any in-depth thinking about the meaning behind the words. For example, no-one would argue that we should not be offering quality teaching and learning experiences. This phrase is used continually by management who constantly affirm their belief in its importance whilst simultaneously cutting academic staff numbers, decreasing payment to casual academic staff and increasing workload; behaviours that run counter to achieving the espoused principle. Because bullshit language is meaningless, staff expected to carry out the actions needed to achieve management's requirements exist in a sea of confusion as they are faced with impossible demands and a complete lack of clarity on how to achieve within the parameters set. Unfortunately, failure to deliver impossible outcomes reinforces managers' views that staff are incompetent, which is then used to justify increased surveillance and accountability requirements, which in turn function to decrease staff time available to actually do the job for which they are paid.

Davis (2017) argues that the use of bullshit language tells us about the person using it; who that person is and who that person wants to be. Using this language demonstrates adherence to the standards expected of those in the management group. These behaviours include a devaluing and distrusting of academics, and an expectation that one, as a manager, is immensely more important than mere academics. This aura of privilege (supported by concrete symbols such as pay, larger office space, personal assistants who function to increase the distance between manager and academics), I argue, has long lasting impacts on the manager.

*Chris was increasingly an email presence in our lives, not a physical presence. Emails became more and more demanding and disrespectful. It was not uncommon for staff to be called to meetings at less than a day's notice (as if we were not busy and could drop what we were doing immediately), an attendance roll was kept and those who did not attend were later emailed and asked for an explanation for their absence. I remember an occasion where two staff engaged in a verbal disagreement in a corridor accessible by students and the whole work unit was sent an email expressing displeasure at unprofessional behaviour (without naming the specific behaviour nor the people actually involved so when I read it, I had no idea what it was about) and a warning that such behaviour would not be tolerated on pain of dismissal. Around that time a review of the work unit written by outside consultants recommended that those who were not willing to fit in to the culture of the work unit should be dismissed, a statement that many around me, including myself, read as a threat. I interpreted this as 'fit in, play the game or get out'.*

It seems to me there is a fine line between the right of managers to manage staff, and workplace bullying to the point that 'in the modern Australian university no clear distinction can be made between workplace bullying and harassment on the one hand and legitimate supervision on the other ... managerialism ... doesn't simply foster bullying but is bullying' (Saunders 2006:16). I lost count of the number of times I heard the phrase 'it is a manager's prerogative to...', for example, refuse a day's leave application even though the academic concerned had organised cover for that one day; reprimand a staff member for having too much casual assistance in a unit even though the unit had been developed at the manager's instigation in a particular format requiring high staffing levels and that the request for casual assistance was within the boundaries set by the workload policy; and that publications in an A\* journal (with which the manager was not familiar) should be dismissed as irrelevant and unimportant in a promotion application reference.

*In my experience much of this bullying occurred electronically. I recall having face-to-face meetings with Chris many times over issues of concern, coming to what*

*all in the room understood to be an agreement, only to have Chris either not take the action agreed, to claim that was not the agreement (despite notes provided as evidence) or to take some other, completely different, action to the detriment of the colleague involved. For example, in one situation Chris agreed that a particular colleague would teach a unit this person had developed and nurtured. However, when that team's workload allocation meeting took place, another colleague claimed the unit and Chris supported this other colleague. Chris's response to the first colleague was a simple denial that an agreement had been reached, then to send an email some time later saying that on further reflection felt that the second colleague was better placed to take on the unit. Another casual colleague provided evidence to an NTEU case where Chris had cut pay to casual academics by two thirds. This casual academic was able to demonstrate work in the same unit over a period of several trimesters, demonstrating the point at which the pay rate was cut for the same work. Chris' response was to send an email thanking the colleague for work done and expressing regret that this colleague would no longer undertake the work.*

It is apparent that those who are successful in retaining a manager's position need to demonstrate by their behaviour that they are part of the neoliberal managerial power group. As West (2016: 6) writes: 'Good managers are those who gets things done, which tends to mean that they are not hampered by either sensitivity for others' feelings or democratic scruples.' Consistent exposure to neoliberal managerial thinking and continuing demonstration of belonging through neoliberal managerial behaviours does, in the longer term I believe, change the person. As a consequence, we see increasing evidence of dark leadership. In his work on the development of dark leadership in schools (Oplatka 2016: 5) wrote that dark leaders were:

*intolerant of criticism from teachers and stakeholders, unwilling to compromise with other school members and stakeholders, and surround themselves with teachers who admire and flatter them. They also enjoy manipulation of others and adopt a distorted stance of reality that is reinforced by their position. Needless to say that a lack of trust prevails in their school. Narcissistic leadership occurs when educational leaders' actions are chiefly motivated by their own egomaniacal needs and beliefs, while at the same time ignoring the needs and interests of stakeholders and school members.*

They:

*aspire to promote their image and status, and in turn, win the admiration of others. Consequently, they are less likely to make efforts for the development and promotion of others, including teachers, minority students, and students with difficulties. In their view, the school is merely a*

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*means to gain unlimited personal power and success, not an organisation aimed at developing students and promoting unprivileged communities* (Oplatka 2016: 6).

Is it possible to remain in a managerial role in higher education today in a neoliberal managerial figured world without being changed, without moving down a spectrum of behaviours towards dark leadership? Certainly, there is evidence the incidence of psychopathy in today's leaders is higher than in the general population (Palmen et al. 2020) and that 'may be irresistible to conform "to neoliberal management expectations" for even the most straightforward and honest person' (Davis 2017: xix). Certainly, my experience suggests to me that those who are unwilling to 'fit in' to the privileged group of management are excluded, either removed from their management role or removed totally from employment. The reality of managerial appointments (usually on fixed term contracts – 3 to 5 years being the most common) means that managers who do not 'fit in', who have not demonstrated sincere and total belonging to the managerial privileged group, can easily be removed and replaced. This level of control over their employment provides additional incentive for managers to comply, to leave behind any ideas they might have relating to democracy, fairness and equity to simply follow the required script to protect their income, their ability to pay their mortgage(s) and their lifestyles.

*I look back over my history with Chris. Initially I was close to calling Chris a friend. We socialised together with a group of others. I had provided large amounts of support to Chris in the workplace, helping with Chris' team dynamics, Chris' promotion application and provided a sounding board for a number of projects and issues where Chris wanted an ear to listen. I initially supported Chris' appointment as manager and looked forward to a workplace where the person making key decisions had a sound understanding of the reality of the day-to-day workplace. In the larger social group, we continued to discuss different ways of thinking about current workplace issues and provided group support for Chris. Gradually Chris pulled away from the social group, and eventually pulled away from contact with colleagues in the workplace. S/he became mainly an electronic presence except when a workplace meeting was called and Chris would stand up the front of staff speaking in grand hyperbole; bullshit phrases that had no meaning and created resentment in me that I was wasting my time being talked at. Ultimately, I ended up supporting a number of colleagues making claims of bullying against Chris in my role as a union case manager. There was more than one colleague where I felt it necessary to contact a family member to share my concerns around potential suicide arising from the extensive, never-ending, nit-picking bullying that totally eroded self-esteem. I began to feel quite ill just being in the same physical space as Chris and my tolerance for*

*the bullshit that continued to be spouted decreased daily. When Chris' contract as manager expired, colleagues all wondered if Chris would come back into the work unit. I was not in the least surprised when Chris chose to leave the organisation rather than do so.*

There is often an expectation when managers are appointed from within the ranks of the workforce that their understanding of the realities of the work will position them to be good advocates for staff. As Barcan (2019: 51-52) writes, these internal promotions have 'greater hope implicitly placed in them to act as a buffer between academics and the big forces of neoliberalism, work intensification, corporatisation and so on, and therefore' staff feel 'a greater sense of betrayal or abandonment if they seem to fail to do so.' In my experience over a long academic career, each betrayal has a cumulative effect, so that I responded to small betrayals in later managers as negatively, if not more negatively, as larger betrayals from earlier managers. Coupled with this is the resentment that is an inevitable consequence of unequal benefits accruing to those in managerial positions. I have seen managers with very few and/or insignificant academic achievements, receiving large rewards whilst hard working academics, with much stronger academic credibility, are demeaned, disrespected and financially penalised. I have seen promotions awarded to colleagues who are in managerial roles but who have little academic credibility in my eyes, whereas other colleagues with extensive, international reputations are overlooked. I have seen people internally appointed into managerial positions with CVs that I consider would not have gotten them shortlisted externally, whilst other, in my eyes, much more qualified candidates are rejected. I have seen colleagues rapidly move up in the managerial hierarchy despite their history of academic incompetence. In all these cases, it appears to me that the key factor contributing to 'success' has been the willingness of the person concerned to demonstrate clearly their belonging to the privileged group of management through their behaviours and their use of bullshit language.

So can today's academic manager maintain any commitment to social justice, to develop a leadership style that reflects the principles of democracy and a valuing of the strengths of others? Can any academic manager today truly lead colleagues rather than just manage them? To be honest I don't know. My own experiences led me to remove myself from management positions when I felt that I was changing from the person I wanted to be. In later years when I thought I understood the pressures and wondered if I could be helpful to colleagues by moving back into management, I was not given the opportunity. One very senior manager told me that the application I had written for the last management position for which I applied, was laughable and impossible to take seriously. I got the message. There was no way that I, as someone who had clearly stated the intention of

managing differently, was going to be allowed anywhere near any position in management. I often wonder if I had been appointed, would I have been able to navigate the treacherous neoliberal figured world and remain true to myself and my values. From the viewpoint of my own health, it's probably very good that I was not able to try.

Academic management today has become the handmaiden of neoliberal managerialism, operating in a figured world that makes it almost (if not totally) impossible to behave in any other way than to follow the script expected. This script is supported by the need to become fluent in bullshit so that the speaker can demonstrate, continually, their belonging in the privileged world of management. I do not see any of this as leadership. To me, it is managerialism at its worst. It seems to me it would take a courageous manager to attempt to manage differently, to challenge the figured world that sets required beliefs and behaviours. Such a person is, in my opinion, not likely to remain in a managerial role. I have seen managers who, in my opinion, have not behaved too egregiously and/or who have the reputation amongst members of the union as not being too bad, being removed from their management role before their contract ended. Perhaps the challenge has to be met at the top, with Vice Chancellors, who presumably have the responsibility of establishing the culture of an organisation and perhaps with councils/senates comprised of academics who can set different values and standards of and for management. Involving staff in democratic decision-making, ensuring that staff voices are heard (and responded to) and prioritising equity are strategies that have the potential to change organisational climate, but only if engagement in them is genuine at all levels, and not just bullshit. Until such a courageous leader emerges, I fear that the figured world of higher education will not change, and successive cohorts of managers will continue to either sell their souls to the dark side of leadership, or at least accept some dark leadership taints in order to maintain their positions of privilege.

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## Author

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## Raewyn Connell on why and how universities need to change, and soon: Interview with Richard Hil

**P**rofessor Emerita Raewyn Connell is more familiar than most with the vagaries of the modern university. Since the early 1970s, Professor Connell has held academic positions at seven universities, in four countries. She has made landmark contributions in sociology, education and other areas, the best-known being her work on patriarchal hegemony and on Southern theory. Her writing has been translated into twenty-four languages. She served twice on a university council, has been on a lot of committees, and is a long-time and honoured member of the NTEU. And there's much, much more. In short, Professor Connell has made an outstanding contribution to academic life both in Australia and beyond. In retirement, she has pursued her commitment to the idea of the public university. Her book, *The Good University - What Universities Actually Do and Why It's Time for Radical Change*, is at once a brilliant overview of what transpires in the modern university and a passionate case for a more open, equitable and democratic tertiary system.

Here, Professor Connell responds to questions put to her by Richard Hil.

**RH:** I thought we might begin our discussion by talking about utopianism. It's a much-maligned word, as we know. I like Rutgers Bregman's play on the term 'utopia for realists'. For our purposes it suggests that utopianism has a role in our reimagining of the modern university. What are your thoughts on utopianism as a means of engaging in this sort of process?

**RC:** Utopian thinking is vital! It's work done by our imagination and creativity – and we will need a lot of that, to get out of the hole our universities are currently in. People who don't like imagination often suggest that utopian thinking must be soggy. But utopias can be carefully reasoned and can deal with tough issues. An excellent example is Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*, which imagines a society attempting to combine equality and freedom, though it has severely limited resources. (Bonus points: the hero is a mathematician.)

You don't have to write a novel to do utopian thinking, either. We often do it in universities. Chatting over coffee with colleagues about better ways our work could be organised; peering at a computer screen and constructing a statistical model; talking with grad students about the future of the discipline – there's a strand of utopian thinking in all that. One could say that theorising, in any discipline, always involves utopian thinking, going beyond the empirically given to a more intelligible world.

Then there are real utopias in higher education – experimental colleges and universities that have actually worked. One story I love is the college Visva-Bharati. It was founded a hundred years ago by the poet Rabindranath Tagore, a critic of the narrow curriculum of colonial universities, to be a place where different civilisations could meet and interact. It survived, and is now a full university in the Indian higher education system.

**RH:** When it comes to the question of governance, how would you characterise the current state of play in the modern university? I'm thinking here of the rise of the 'manageriat' and the position and status of academic employees.

**RC:** There is variation around the world. Some countries – Brazil, India, Chile for instance – have a high proportion of privately owned colleges and universities. In these countries the owners and managers have virtually full control, and use it to extract profits from the students (and from the governments). By contrast, there are countries – China is the leading example – where the state and the ruling party have a powerful presence in university management. Here the regime chooses what universities to fund and promote, and what fields of knowledge should be developed. In the United States, in many universities there is still a good deal of autonomy at the level of the department. But this is being challenged by the growth of corporate management; Gaye Tuchman's book *Wannabe U* is an excellent case study of this.

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Australia is a curious case. Our universities used to be funded by the individual states, and were informally run by an oligarchy of professors. The Commonwealth government took over the funding in the 1970s and initially just asked the universities to expand their intake.

But from the late 1980s the Commonwealth has used the power of the purse to direct universities down a new path – competition and corporatisation, increasingly funded by fees. Policy now defines universities as competitive firms, though the government has always controlled the terms of the competition. University administrations have been reshaped on the model of corporate management, gradually centralising control in a top tier of highly-paid managers. Real for-profit corporations have moved in, as more and more functions were outsourced. (At a picket line one day, I found that the security personnel watching us, though wearing University uniforms, were actually from an outside company.) As the Coalition's 2020 Job-ready Graduates policy shows, government control of a notionally public higher education system is now systematically used to promote corporate interests.

**RH:** University councils and senates are increasingly comprised of a majority of people from business backgrounds, often with little or no direct prior experience of universities. What's your view on this?

**RC:** It's an important change. When I served on a university council a generation ago, as an elected staff representative, there was a wider range in the membership. The predominance of business executives now has troubling effects. They bring, of course, their own occupational culture and collective interests to the role. There's nothing exotic about their outlook, they share the general culture of the rich and powerful in contemporary capitalism. They support top-down decision-making, they prefer secrecy, they assume a world of profit-taking, they assume competition not co-operation, and they don't care to mingle with the proles. They think it's natural to pay senior executives a million dollars or more, while making the workforce more precarious to drive down labour costs. It's good business sense.

**RH:** You've written an important book called *The Good University*. I wonder whether you might sketch some of the major changes that you think might alter governance arrangements in the modern university?

**RC:** Thank you! In the final chapter of the book, where I sketch out the criteria for a good university, I use the dangerous phrase 'industrial democracy'. That includes equality in wages and conditions, shared decision-making, and shared responsibility. It doesn't take rocket science to recognise that the people who know most about the work of a university are those who actually do the work.

We know lots of ways to run organisations more democratically. Universities have experience with them! They include circulation of leadership, decentralisation of power, deliberative bodies, election of representatives, participatory decision-making, inclusive discussions of policy... The crucial thing is to make democracy normal. It can sound a bit strenuous. But I'm sure that once established, it will take up less time than the current system of surveillance, hierarchy, box-ticking, reporting, re-structuring and anxious compliance with unending, badly-written directives from above.

In the same chapter I also speak of criteria for a good university system, since it's crazy to think of universities as isolated from each other, despite the ideology of competition. We need ways to make decisions about cooperation among universities. We used to have a statutory Universities Commission in Australia – not very strong and not notably democratic, but at least it was there, as a forum and a counterbalance. It was first weakened, then abolished, in favour of ministerial prerogative – the political version of entrepreneurial management.

**RH:** In the book you drew on some great examples of, let's say, more progressive universities around the world, particularly when it comes to governance and other matters. Why do you think these examples are important in terms of discussing the future university?

**RC:** Yes, there is quite a history. Indigenous universities, anti-colonial universities, labour colleges, do-it-yourself Free Universities, greenfields universities in Britain, university villages in Venezuela, community-based access programs, popular research movements, bi-cultural universities, and more. I love the story of the Flying University in Poland, opposed to three authoritarian regimes in turn. It was called 'flying' because its classes had to move around to dodge the secret police.

There's a colourful history of universities, which ought to be better known. I value this history not just because of the colour, but because of the practicality. These were colleges, universities and movements that have actually existed, actually taught and researched; they are not pie in the sky. That's an excellent thing to bear in mind when we discuss future universities: we can make fresh ideas work in practice.

Some didn't last, some changed, some got taken over. So what else is new? They are as rich a source of ideas as Humboldt's University of Berlin or Kerr's University of California, and a much better source than Newman's reactionary *Idea of a University*.

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**RH:** I wonder whether we can do some reverse sequencing – management-speak for tracking how we get to our desired outcome. Let's start by asking who should be involved in this process? I'm especially interested here in the roles of students, administrators and even some of the manageriat themselves.

**RC:** Students are the largest group on campus – or online – and are vital in a process of democratisation. Most don't come to university intending to re-organise it; they come to learn, and to participate in the campus life. But for many, perhaps most, the experience is not what they hope for; there's a widespread experience of alienation from the institution. Richard, your own research shows this vividly! Students have entirely legitimate needs – complex intellectual, social and cultural needs – that the managerial university and the 'customer satisfaction' mantra miss.

A full half of the university workforce are non-academic groups: professionals, tradespeople, maintenance workers, clerical and administrative workers, building attendants, and more. Much of the discussion of university problems proceeds as if academics were the only folk who matter, and this always gets up my nose. In the first three chapters of *The Good University* I look at the actual labour process, and show how both research and teaching depend on the know-how and co-operation of multiple groups of workers. Universities work from below, not from above.

So of course, the administrative staff need to be involved in democratic reconstruction. They may perfectly well lead it, as they currently take leadership roles in the NTEU. They have vital skills and information; there are many good administrators around. They have legitimate needs for good working conditions, secure jobs, and the opportunity to develop their own ideas and agendas.

As for the top managers: it may be that some of them have valuable skills. I find it hard to judge. So much of top management now is done behind closed doors, reporting upwards not downwards. What is sent out to the rank and file of workers is a mixture of non-negotiable directives and inane propaganda. Any other skills seem to be overwhelmed by the function of command. I'm sure dissident members of the manageriat may be helpful in launching organisational change. But in democratic change, their privileges and their power must go.

**RH:** How can we engage policy makers in these sorts of discussions?

**RC:** Some of them can't be engaged, because a democratic reform of universities is against their interest, or because of their political line – the know-nothing

populism pursued by Barnaby Joyce would be an example. With others, the fact that the universities matter to the economy as the basis of professional education might count for something. If universities are in trouble, the 'knowledge economy' in Australia is in trouble.

I think it has dawned on some in government that Australia's dream run as supplier of raw materials to industrialising economies overseas is coming to an end, and if another economic future is possible, it has to have a large place for knowledge producers. Some, especially on the Labor side, might see a positive role for social sciences and humanities. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened fissures in Australian society that complacent governments prefer to gloss over – witness the paramilitary occupation of working-class south-western Sydney (officially, 'areas of concern').

**RH:** What specific forms of, let's call it academic activism, do you think might generate collective action for change in the university?

**RC:** First, let me repeat that academics are only half of the university workforce, and that the other half is equally important in making a university work. Collective action to reform the institution has to come from the staff as a whole. That is one of the great strengths of the NTEU in Australia; it's an industry union not a craft union. When I have mentioned this overseas, where academics and general staff are usually organised separately, there is surprise and interest.

There are many forms of action: legal defence against victimisation, industrial action around enterprise bargaining, public demonstrations and electoral campaigning around policy, coalition-building, whistleblowing about corruption and bullying, grassroots organising to build up strength, local boycotts of irrational demands or overloads. All of these are needed, and they are all demanding and absorbing.

So I'll emphasise a form of action that is sometimes pushed aside in the shuffle, but is really important in the long run: creating working models of good practice. For instance, democratic decision-making at the level of a department, unit or project; mutual support in difficult circumstances; and other actions that aren't defensive but actually create elements of the university we want for the future. This approach used to be called 'prefigurative politics'; it involves utopian thinking that can be turned into immediate practice. It is possible in many circumstances, though not all; and when it's done, it's important to tell people about it!

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**RH:** What obstacles do you envisage in this process?

**RC:** Managerial prerogative; intimidation and threats, especially towards casualised staff; corporate ideology; legal obstruction; slander from the Murdoch media; sneers from Coalition politicians; exhaustion. Remedies: solidarity; determination; pacing oneself; support from outside; and knowing that struggle now matters profoundly to the future of universities, their staff and their students. And to society as a whole.

**RH:** Let's assume you're a level B academic who's been given a continuing contract – an increasingly threatened species in the modern university. What might this person do if irritated by the top-down exercise of power?

**RC:** I have a good three-point plan: 1. Join the union. 2. Join the union. 3. Join the union. Seriously, only collective action is effective as a response to power. In almost all cases I would recommend talking with others in your department or unit about what annoyed you, as it's likely they will be affected too. You will need their support to push back against management pressure. To push back usually requires you to show that a certain demand, restructure or imposed system – whatever the exercise of power might be – damages the proper concerns of a university: teaching, research, outreach, staff and student wellbeing. The way the current system works, it's rank and file staff who have to look after the future of universities.

#### **Postscript: Universities and being human**

**RH:** Thanks for taking the time to answer these questions Raewyn. You've certainly prompted me to reconsider a few things – in particular, that whatever action academics take it must be alongside other staff and students who make up the university. The public too have an interest in what goes on in these places. You make it clear that the university is much more than academics and management.

I think it's worth mentioning a recently established advocacy group that has done some extraordinary work of late, mainly in highlighting dubious investment and accounting practices.

APU also notes that COVID-19 has been used by university management as a pretext to cull casual staff, most of whom are women, and to cut courses. But there's more. Members of the APU have been working hard to show that Australian universities have shifted away from their core business as public institutions (as stipulated by state and territory legislatures) to what look like private firms. One of the favourite moves is constant restructuring which, during COVID-19, has meant the axe for many

tenured academics (especially if they are troublesome, outspoken types. Really? Yes, just ask around).

I won't repeat all the failings of the modern university you have so clearly articulated, Raewyn. Suffice to say that the neoliberal university falls well short when it comes to good governance, workplace conditions and social justice.

What's forgotten in all this is that the people that make up universities are human – not simply 'employees' or 'service providers'. The majority choose to work in these places because they are passionate about the idea of the university. They believe that universities should contribute to the common good, seek out the truth, and act as bulwarks against tyranny. They shouldn't be industrial sausage factories or edutainment shopping malls. They want their students to have a joyful, rewarding educational experience that makes them better citizens as well as competent in their chosen fields. They don't want them to become career-obsessed automatons, nor for education to resemble a McDonalds drive through.

Which is all a long-winded way of getting to my question: Raewyn, you're one of Australia's most respected social scientists; someone who has throughout her career fought for the idea of the public university. You believe in the democratisation of these institutions and their uncoupling from neoliberal agendas. As a seasoned academic, if I can put it that way, how do you feel about what you're witnessing in the modern university? And, what are the prospects of radical change?

**RC:** How do I feel about it? Mainly, a mixture of sadness and anger. Sadness: about the blighted hopes of so many young university workers. About the loss of trust and confidence in what universities are doing. About the shrunken vision among policymakers and managers. About the decline of cooperation and experiment. About the loss of joy in the university world.

Anger: because this was avoidable. These losses, this shrinking, have been deliberately produced. The short-term aim is to produce a cheaper and more easily controlled workforce, in the universities themselves and in the economy downstream. The long-term aim – but there is no long-term aim. Corporate Australia, including its political wing, has realised that it doesn't need a flourishing university system in Australia. An economy centred on raw materials exports doesn't need a local research capacity – the technology is imported – nor a highly educated national workforce. So why waste Jobkeeper on universities, when the money can be given to deserving billionaires?

The conservative parties in Australia today are basically businesses: small bodies of professional power-seekers,

funded by the corporate rich and closely linked to the corporate mass media. They assemble votes through a combination of fear campaigns, religious loyalties, regional stereotypes, coded racism, and the economic interests of property owners. When they win elections, they treat government as a well of money to be channelled to their backers, through privatisations, outsourcing, tax cuts and out-and-out handouts. Don't expect the Coalition to expand public institutions like universities. The trajectory of slow cuts and backdoor privatisation will continue.

And the Opposition? So far under the current leadership, the Opposition is Morrison Lite, and happy with the results. Like the conservatives, the ALP is no longer a mass party. Its working-class voters can influence policy, with complicated effects. Working-class families' aspirations for higher education were one of the drivers of the Dawkins policies; but those policies in the long run handed over the universities to the corporate world. The last time the party had national power, under Rudd and Gillard, it ended full-fee local degrees, but continued on the path of 'efficiency dividends', competition and corporatisation.

Prospects of radical change from the current political system? Nil. But that doesn't mean we should just roll over. I can see two paths along which we can get radical change under way. One is the path of prefigurative politics: building practical utopias locally, both inside and outside existing universities, on principles of industrial democracy, cooperation, and work in the public interest. It doesn't matter how small the scale; it all builds practical experience.

The other is the path of organising: good old-fashioned, gritty, face-to-face organising, to change the wider environment in which policies are made, nationally and internationally. Some unions are doing this, some of the climate movement is doing this, so are other social movements. Much of the energy is still siphoned off into NGOs and social media, and of course the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed our thinking on-line. But as the corporate world 'opens up', new possibilities for politics too will emerge. Yes, the universities and their workforce are in a grim situation. Sadness and anger are warranted. But other reactions are possible too: hope, determination, and joy in building something better.

#### Authors

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## Book REVIEW

**Richard Hil, Kristen Lyons and Fern Thompsett 2021  
*Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis: A University for the Common Good*, Routledge, London.  
ISBN: 978-0-367-89781-9 (hbk)**

In the last decades of his life sociologist Erik Olin Wright dedicated his time to identifying alternatives to capitalism. His major contribution to debates about a more inclusive, more just, future for humanity – *Envisioning Real Utopias* – diagnoses the internal contradictions of capitalism while analysing the practical ways that societies could become more cooperative, equal, and free. An emancipatory social science would be an essential element in bringing about positive change. In *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis*, authors Hil, Lyons and Thompsett take up Wright's challenge of analysing structures of power – in this case within and outside of the modern university. They do so by employing the kind of critical, emancipatory social science that Wright so dearly sought.

The authors trace the colonial roots of education, showing how biases about land ownership and property rights contributed to the brutal dispossession of indigenous populations. They show how, in more recent times, the embrace of neoliberal ideologies and practices have contributed significantly to climate change and to ecological destruction. That is, because of their capture by colonial, masculinist and neoliberal ideologies and practices, universities are perpetuating, rather than solving, the great problems of our time. Curricula and pedagogies, along with the research undertaken by universities encourage the commoditisation of nature while promoting individualism, social disconnectedness, economic inequality, and unsustainable growth. Higher education is firmly entrenched in this rapacious model of 'progress'.

Neoliberalism is all about a small state and privatisation of public resources, and higher education – once a public good – has become the opposite of what it promised. Freedom of expression has been compromised, research is being pushed down corporate lines, and values such as respect, compassion, reciprocity and collegiality have been seriously eroded. Battered by funding cuts, damaged by right-wing political attacks in the 'culture wars', and being told by governments to become more efficient and cost-effective, universities have been forced into competition, relying upon market mechanisms to ensure survival. The business model accompanying these changes has seen Vice Chancellors become corporate managers, distant from academic staff and from students, instead doing the bidding of the corporate sector. Managerialism has excluded the academic community from involvement in important decisions, while giving priority to commercial imperatives like market share and profitability. A primary goal of the modern university is to produce job-ready workers for industry, not equip graduates to think critically and creatively about complex futures.

While much of the above has become a standard critique of the university-under-neoliberalism, the authors go beyond this by exploring the many ‘spaces’ and strategies that challenge and undermine centralised structures. They explore the ‘edge work’ that is located in resilience initiatives, radical reading groups, inter-disciplinary collectives, community education and the like. They provide detailed examples of successful initiatives in education – attempts at democratic governance (the Sands School in Devon, Deep Springs College in California, the University of Bologna, co-governance models in Latin America, the Social Science Centre in Lincoln, England, and the ‘Free’ universities in the US and Mexico). They are also cognisant of the very hard times ahead in seeking transformational change for universities. Nevertheless, they consider there is a major chink in the armour of the corporate university – it has proven itself incapable of addressing the range of global crises that beset the planet, whether it be climate change, environmental destruction, social dislocation, economic inequality, or the current pandemic. The authors go so far as to pronounce the modern university ‘dead’ and say its replacement must be a dynamic mix of active citizenship, peace, justice, ecological health, and indigenous sovereignty (p. 152).

The goal of the authors is clearly radical and provocative – wanting to reinstate a sense of ‘the commons, community and communalities’ into university life:

The future university, we contend, must be grounded in a shared commitment to de-colonise, decentralise and democratise institutional arrangements, and to situate human experience within the broader web of life (p. 29)

The major achievements of the book are fourfold. First, its compelling critical and analytical dissection of the modern university exposes the latter’s undemocratic decision-making structures, its vulnerabilities under neoliberalism, and its inability to serve the public’s interests in solving the big problems of our time. Second, its exploration of alternatives – while somewhat tentative – demonstrates that different power (and decision-making) structures exist and provide worthy options for the future. Third, the book is extremely well researched – with a plethora of up-to-date and pertinent references accompanying each chapter. Fourth, the book is an original and provocative academic contribution to debates about the future of universities. It has been written in a clear and forceful manner; the authors do not shy away from proposing and endorsing features they believe must be part of a re-imagined, re-invigorated, university sector.

There are two issues of concern. The first is that of incorporating the ‘local’ into what has become a global university system. They argue for local community involvement as part of future democratisation. It could just as easily be argued that the global community is as much a player in the modern university as the local. Does a global community have a role to play in deciding on future governance structures, pedagogy, curricula and so forth? If so, how might global citizens’ voices be incorporated? Second, it is a long bow to draw to pronounce the modern

university ‘dead’, or less dramatically, in need of ‘hospice’ care. Evidence abounds to show that there are healthy, productive, collegial spaces in most universities and that these continue to house creativity and innovation – often encouraged and nurtured by managerialist VCs eager to secure external prestige and status from the work of their employees!

While the book has a strong Australian flavour, it is a must-read for a global academic audience, in fact for anyone involved in the university sector. It provokes us to think there might be different and more collegial ways to live our academic lives while producing knowledge that will bring tangible benefits to people and to the planet. And, as for Erik Wright? I feel certain he would have viewed the book as a major contribution to the development of a real utopia for future tertiary education.

#### Author

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#### War is hell

in my father’s Mess in North Africa  
when moustache growing contests

became tiresome the officers  
were avid readers of Damon Runyon

giving each other nicknames in his  
manner such as Harry the Horse

Dave the Dude Benny the Barker  
until a new posting to the unit

introduced himself by his real name  
as James (call me Jimmy) de Joux

and the suspicion lingered ever  
afterwards he was having them on

or that the transfer was mischievous  
engineered by those bastards at GHQ

TONY BEYER

# 1975 and *Mother I'm Rooted*: The legacy of Kate Jennings as anthologist

AIDAN COLEMAN

Kate Jennings (1948-2021) turned her hand to virtually every form of writing, from speeches and journalism to poems, novels, short stories and non-fiction. For many, her value is located beyond the literary world, and she is credited with inaugurating second-wave feminism in Australia with her 1970 speech at the Vietnam moratorium rally on the lawns of Sydney University (Moore 2021: np). As a writer, she took a while longer to make a mark. Her first poetry collection, *Come to Me My Melancholy Baby*, is far from her best work, and it was followed by fifteen years of virtual silence, during which time she developed what Erik Jensen (2017) characterises as her ruthless precision. Her only other poetry collection *Cats, Dogs and Pitchforks* (1993), gave Jennings a national reputation as a poet; *Snake* (1996) – a marvel of economy – might be the best work of contemporary Australian fiction not to be shortlisted for a national award but her second novel *Moral Hazard* (2002), won a number of honours, including the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. In this brief essay, however, I would like to focus, not on these many achievements, but on Jennings's importance as an anthologist.

Jennings's debut collection and the anthology *Mother I'm Rooted* both appeared in 1975 on Outback, a small press based in Melbourne. It was the latter work that gained her fame and notoriety. The three-page introduction reads as if it was dashed off in the white heat of anger and the prose is deliberately provocative:

... a woman writer has to be 10 times better, 10 times more consistent, and so be much stronger than any male with equivalent talent to overcome the usual obstacles to reach publication. ... The literary world is for the most part controlled by a small backslapping, back biting group of men and a few male identified women whose, as my dad would say, blood isn't worth bottling (Jennings 1975: 10).

Jennings correctly identified that in a supposed period of liberation women were still poorly represented in publishing. In fact, their representation in poetry

publishing may have been worse during the sixties and seventies than in the previous decades. In *12 Poets 1950-1970* (Craig 1971), for example, only Gwen Harwood broke the glass ceiling. No side in the so-called poetry wars could capture the moral high ground on this issue either. The Generation of '68 anthology *The New Australian Poetry*, edited by John Tranter (1979), claimed to align itself with the revolutionary, but it featured a mere two female poets among twenty. The rival anthology, *The Younger Australian Poets* (1983), edited by Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann, was a little better but still not great – featuring six female writers out of twenty-nine. In 1986, Susan Hampton and Kate Llewellyn noted that among 'fifteen well-known collections of Australian poetry published since 1970' female authors comprised 17 per cent and that the average number of pages of women's poetry was a paltry 13 per cent (Hampton and Llewellyn 1986: 2). Certainly, there was a dire need for Jennings's anthology.

Beyond representing hitherto unheard voices, Jennings aimed to question the supposedly objective nature of literary standards. She identified a prejudice against what she labeled as 'women's subject matter': from the domestic and childbirth to 'feminine conditioning and female perceptions'. Further, she looked to challenge standards 'of what is supposed to be good and bad poetry' (Jennings 11). Sylvia Kantarizis's 'By their poems ye shall know them: poem', which acts as a prologue of sorts, begins by addressing just that issue:

All I know about poetry is that it has  
something to do with sex,  
something very close to sex,  
polarised sex –  
all the words are erect and pointing  
in one direction (Jennings 2).

The ambiguity of 'sex' suggests the ways in which men and women will read the poem differently. The poem seems to suggest that men – who are likely to

assume the non-gendered meaning of sex – will miss the gendered-exclusivity of poetry and its accompanying culture. For such readers, inclusion and exclusion are simply a matter of standards, or an objective aesthetic measure, the argument ‘point[s] / in one direction’. Kantarizis’s poem ends in personification. The poem is ‘dishevelled’

legs apart in loneliness and  
desperation,  
and you talk about standards (Jennings 2).

Jennings herself writes back to Kantarizis’s poem ‘All of a heap anywhere, Megara, Megara’ (Jennings 257), the one poem of her own she includes in *Mother I’m Rooted*. Suffice to say, ‘standards’ are interrogated throughout the anthology, as content and identity are foregrounded.

The democratic nature of the anthology was, in part, a response to these priorities and what was originally conceived as a ‘neat’ anthology metamorphosed into ‘a collective statement about the position of women in Australia’ (Jennings 10). The anthology began with Jennings putting out an open call for submissions, which received ‘over 500 replies and manuscripts ranging from one poem to 200’ (Jennings 10). The deliberately indecorous aesthetic was signaled by the lack of a contents page or poet biographies; the book’s 152 poets, represented by anything between one and a dozen poems are simply ordered alphabetically. The volume’s memorable title, *Mother I’m Rooted*, registers an inter-generational address but, through a uniquely Australian idiom, it also suggests a plethora of meanings: from being exhausted or intoxicated to sexual intercourse; the latter, in particular, knowingly casts the title’s speaker as a passive object. But Jennings might have had still another meaning in mind: that of ‘taking root’ and beginning to grow, and, in this way, the name was prophetic.

The anthology’s significance was understood by few reviewers at the time but some conceded that Jennings’s arguments were valid. Martin Johnston, a university friend of Jennings, was later to recall the consternation among male reviewers,

who thought [the anthology] had something to do with bra-burning and were incapable of seeing that their own motions [sic] of poetry of “quality” were – as Jennings had argued all along – socially constructed, not delivered from on high (Johnston 1993: 234).

According to Hampton and Llewellyn the anthology had an enormous effect on Australia’s female writers: ‘all

over the country women who had been accustomed to seeing themselves as inhabitants in men’s poems ... were hearing from themselves’ (Hampton and Llewellyn 1986). The book sold 4,000 copies, which was – and still is – a remarkable figure for an independent press. But beyond the anthology’s impressive sales the book was a starting point for many female writers, and the first taste of national recognition for many more. The volume of 563 pages included 162 poets, a few of whom published under pseudonyms. The list included later-acclaimed writers: Katherine Gallagher, Helen Garner, Barbara Giles, Pam Brown (then Pamela Cocabola Brown), Joanne Burns, Lee Cataldi, Beatrice Faust, Jennifer Maiden, Judith Rodriguez, Vicki Viidakas, Jennifer Rankin, Deb Westbury and Carol Novak. A few of the poets included – such as Anne Elder and Antigone Kefala – had already published first books. The majority had only published in small magazines, or not at all.

Writing following Jennings’s death last year, Nicole Moore wrote that *Mother I’m Rooted* ‘arguably chang[ed] the literary landscape in Australia forever’ (Moore 2021: np). The book was the first of many Australian anthologies of women’s poetry. It created a space for new women writers, while challenging notions of taste. But it also captured a moment in time that can never be repeated.

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## Author

Aidan Coleman is an Early Career Researcher at the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide. He has published three collections of poetry, which have been shortlisted for the NSW Premier’s Kenneth Slessor Award, the John Bray Poetry Award and the WA Premier’s Book Awards. His research has been published in *JASAL*, *New Writing*, *Text and Westerly*. With the assistance of an Australia Council grant for the arts, Aidan is currently completing a biography, *Thin Ice: A Life of John Forbes*.

## Wellbeing Report

My psychologist says  
that walking away from something unhealthy  
is brave.

It's from being love starved,  
now it's connection I crave.

But be careful, he says,  
because there are flags  
the same colour as  
passion.

Lies are satisfying  
when you're hungry  
broken and distracted.

So I tell myself to  
be brave but beware:  
vampires suck life  
out of shiny souls seeking repair.

My psychologist says I can't rescue people,  
Can't fix them, can't change them.  
So he tells me to use  
them  
To hold a mirror up:  
"It's a reflection of them, not you"  
He says,  
"They only seek out for themselves,  
shattering hearts like confetti:  
A narcissist's love is not romantic.  
It's pathetic".

My psychologist says that  
testing my lover's commitment  
is risky. That I shouldn't invent struggle  
in case he doesn't miss me.

There's nothing wrong with me  
he says: birth stories leave us all  
questioning our worth  
and state of wellbeing.

My mother fears pain,  
so the Dr knocked her  
out  
leaving me scared  
In a world  
I did not recognise  
The tar stained fingers fumbling  
my umbilical cord like a cigarette.

My psychologist says I should  
stop performing In bed  
Channel my emotions  
into music Instead.  
But playing Taylor Swift  
makes me realise how  
delicate I am  
my wellbeing report reads:  
'healing, not dead'.

At the last session  
my psychologist says that  
Facing shadows is brave  
And the demons I'm slaying  
should be very afraid.

But it's not anger I feel  
or vexation  
or rage.  
It's more like an artist's  
desire to create  
but with even more glitter, more pencils,  
and more paint.

Finally he asks me: "What's an artist like in  
love"?  
And I say: "she is poetry in motion  
until the healing is done".

ADELLE SEFTON-ROWSTON

### Ruin

I can mouth a name  
like a curse  
dipped in liquid gold,

like a boiled sweet  
stuck inside  
a silver mesh handbag,

like a fox  
with a jewel  
on every toe.

I can slip ink  
into any tonic.

There are ruins  
too ruined  
to attract tourists,

skyscrapers too dull  
to even  
scratch a cloud.

GEMMA PARKER

### In the know

*Are you learning  
from your reading, Papa?  
my daughter asks.*

I'm learning, always learning,  
slowly touched  
by the skin of everything,

that angel without papers  
sneaking up on me just when,  
in my signature naivete,

I thought I was in the know

JOHN FALZON

### Elsewhere

After Derek Mahon

Each morning I rise before dawn,  
release Aslan out the back door,

shower, dress, breakfast,  
drive my daughter to school,

walk streets lined with leafless  
oaks in single-digit temperatures

to a campus with lush manicured  
lawns and groomed flowerbeds

to teach privileged young minds  
in comfortable heated classrooms.

Elsewhere, koalas, kangaroos,  
echidnas and wallabies burn.

Family and friends don masks,  
suck on Ventolin inhalers,

sweep ashes from driveways,  
choke on smoke suffocating

hometowns. Relatives evacuate  
by boat, roads to escape cut

by fire, text photos across  
the oceans of apocalyptic skies.

NATHANAEL O'REILLY

### The German

*Helmet and uniform buried. Civilian clothes stolen.  
I've found wild berries, a creek. When there's no moon I  
Dare to search further afield. Last night I heard  
English voices near the quarry. I have four bullets left.*

PETER BAKOWSKI

### **Shared Wall**

my daughter plays chords on a Fender Strat  
creates vibrations, reverb and feedback  
plays Hozier and Cavetown at high volume

on the other side of our shared wall

chats on the phone with schoolfriends for hours  
listens to dark academia podcasts  
knits scarves and beanies from emerald green wool

on the other side of our shared wall

paints characters with oils and watercolours  
illustrates her graphic novel in progress  
sleeps curled up until lunchtime on weekends

on the other side of our shared wall

applies red lipstick and straightens her black hair  
burns incense and eucalyptus candles  
reads Donna Tartt, Katie Mack and Sylvia Plath

on the other side of our shared wall

studies theatre, art history and psychology  
covers walls with Studio Ghibli postcards  
drapes green ivy across the white ceiling

on the other side of our shared wall

**NATHANAEL O'REILLY**

### **Chimp 1164**

Chimp 1164 has gone mad  
in his cage –  
pale, wan face  
faded as a sun-worn shell.  
Stuck in the corner, hunched,  
mumbling to himself over  
and over  
like an old alcoholic.  
His cage is a black box  
bounded  
by a barred metal fence.  
He sits the long hours of his life  
between endless needles,  
surgeries and scans –  
a Messiah for the drug-addicted,  
the haemophiliacs and  
other sad unfortunates.  
A pin-cushion for Alpha-Pharm,  
Glaxo-Smith-Kline or Gilead.  
His crucifix is made of long hours  
of solitude, of boredom, of  
nothing but empty silence  
and the watch of his indifferent captors.  
Torture is his daily grind, until –  
One day, finally - a cure!  
Daclatasvir, Sofosbuvir –  
and many can live again  
Hep C free -  
walking from their bodies' cage  
into a freedom Chimp 1164  
will never know.

### **first**

To heal the Earth

you first have to heal yourself

*Who controls the water  
controls the land*

*The whole world is watching*

The cry from the cradle

A legacy of missed opportunity

**RORY HARRIS**

### **CARY HAMLYN**

### **Loneliness**

they say you get used to it  
you do

they think that makes it better  
it doesn't

it makes them feel better —  
you stop complaining

**VIVIAN GARNER**

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