

## Cannibalising the Collegium: The Plight of the Humanities and Social Sciences in the Managerial University

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The rise of corporate management styles and values in higher education has led to growing exploitation of academic workers, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, through insecure employment. This has diminished the political influence of the very scholars who should be best placed and most inclined to defend the cherished values of academic freedom, collegiality and critical thinking from the depredations of neoliberalism. As public funding diminishes, so universities are becoming less inclined to cross-subsidise vulnerable curricula in the humanities, social sciences and pure sciences, especially in specialised fields of low student demand or fields in which pedagogical requirements are most intensive. In order to make the funding dollar go further, managers have resorted to employing members of the ‘cognitariat’—sessional, casual or short contract staff—to perform a growing proportion of academic work. This is part of a larger economic programme that has imposed Taylorist bureaucratic

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regulation of much academic work. In this chapter, I will chart the rise of the mass university in Australia, in particular the growth in undergraduate student numbers over the last 20 years. I will argue that the management of this growth—the rounds of organisational change and course rationalisation—has demoralised academic communities and eroded scholarly bonds. Most scholars, however, shrink from the prospect of openly challenging managerialism’s invidious effects. However, in a world in which centralised bureaucratic organisations are becoming increasingly obsolete, the managerial university appears something of an anachronism, and hence vulnerable to challenge.

### THE EXPANDING ACADEMY: AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SINCE WORLD WAR II

Prior to World War II, the Australian university was the domain of a tiny privileged elite, but this changed in the post-war era. Between 1946 and 1963, university enrolments of 17- to 22-year-olds increased from 2.3 % to 7.1 %. A further expansion occurred after 1974, when the Whitlam Labor government abolished fees and introduced tertiary assistance; but this did not produce any significant increase in the numbers of those from poor backgrounds undertaking tertiary study, and universities continued to be the preserve of the upper and middle class (see Centre for the Study of Higher Education 2008). The most rapid expansion occurred in the 1990s after the restructuring of the tertiary education by Labor Minister for Education John Dawkins. While this saw the reintroduction of fees, in the form of income-contingent Higher Education Contribution Scheme, the Dawkins reforms also dramatically increased the number of university places by granting university status to the former Colleges of Advanced Education. From this point on, university enrolments grew at an unprecedented rate, particularly in the newer universities.

In recent times, the idea of the mass university has come to challenge the elite feudal vision of higher education (see Marginson 2000), largely because a rapid rise in youth unemployment has produced a situation where most young people without a degree have dismal job prospects. Youth unemployment rose from around 8 % in 2007 to 14.1 % in 2014, and many of the available jobs are low-paid, precarious and dead-end ‘McJobs’ (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2014). So there has been a de facto extension of the period of compulsory education—which in the mid-twentieth century lasted only until the age of fourteen—into early

adulthood, especially for those from underprivileged backgrounds. The ability of universities to play their part in absorbing this overspill—keeping young people off the dole queues—was limited by the system of enrolment caps that restricted the numbers of students that universities could accept with full public funding. By the mid-2000s, the technocratic argument, according to which an expansion of university places is needed to overcome the ‘skills deficit’ and compete in the so-called knowledge economy, was gaining public support.

Such an expansion became more likely with the election of Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2007, which unseated the conservative administration of John Howard. The 2008 Bradley Review into higher education, ordered by the Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard, recommended a dramatic expansion of the university system. It set two key targets: first, that by 2025, 40 % of 25- to 34-year-olds should hold a bachelor’s degree, and second, that by 2020, 20 % of university enrolments should be comprised of those from low socio-economic backgrounds. In 2009, the federal government announced that after 2012 there would be a removal of restrictions on the number of students that universities were permitted to enrol, and that from 2012 public funding would follow student demand. In the period between 2009 and 2012, when, under interim arrangements, universities received part funding for those enrolled above the caps, commencing student numbers increased by 21.3 % (see Edwards and Radloff 2013). This trend continued after caps were lifted. In 2012, the numbers of domestic undergraduates (excluding overseas students) rose by 5.1 % from the previous year, and in 2013, the numbers increased a further 5.5 % (see Department of Education and Training 2012; 2013). But in this environment of increased competition, universities aggressively sought to attract more students and increase enrolments. Between 2009 and 2014, there was a 10.3 % increase in the number of applications for degree places, while the number of accepted offers increased by 20 %. This produced pedagogical challenges especially as increasing numbers of students who performed relatively poorly at school enrolled in university degrees (see Edwards and Radloff 2013) just as per capita resources for teaching and learning were diminishing.

Despite the lofty public rhetoric about the importance of universities to national prosperity, and the prodigious growth in undergraduate enrolments, state investment has declined in real terms. In the decade after 1995, public expenditure on higher education fell by 4 % as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP)—mostly the years of Howard’s Prime

Ministerial term—as student numbers increased by 45 % (see May et al. 2011). Over this period, Australia was the only Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country in which real public spending did not increase (see Tiffen 2015). By 2011, only 54 % of funding for universities came from private sources (see OECD 2014) in comparison with 87 % in 1986 (see May et al. 2011, p. 34). Private funding included the Higher Education Contribution Scheme paid by domestic students and full fees paid by the rapidly increasing numbers of overseas students. Today, Australia spends less on universities as a proportion of GDP than all but one of the OECD countries. As Tiffen wrote:

In 2011, the last year for which full international data is available, Australia’s public funding of universities ranked thirty-third out of the thirty-four OECD member countries. Governments across the OECD spent an average of 1.1 per cent of GDP on universities; Australia devoted just 0.7 per cent. Six countries – including Canada, at 1.6 per cent – spent at least double Australia’s proportion of national income. Finland, at 1.9 per cent, tops the list. (Tiffen 2015)

Universities responded to this squeeze by undermining the conditions of teaching and learning: by cutting teaching time and staffing levels, and by increasing class sizes. The common management refrain in industrial negotiations over academic salary increases was the demand for improved ‘productivity’, which effectively meant embracing the challenge of teaching larger numbers of students, especially through the use of digital technologies. In the early 1960s, the average student–staff ratio across Australian universities was around 8:1 (see Bebbington 2012); by 2010, it was over 20:1, even taking casual staff into consideration (see Larkins 2012).

Universities have also used conservative staffing strategies to sandbag against the effects of declining marginal funding. Since the early 1990s, they have been systematically casualising academic work—employing seasonal or casual staff—in order to cover teaching and research assistance at much lower cost than they would have to pay full-time staff. Between 1990 and 2008, casual academic staff numbers, on a full-time equivalent basis, grew by 180 %, compared with a 41 % growth in non-casual academic staff numbers during the same period (see May et al. 2011, p. 191). This effectively meant that the number of low-paid casual staff now probably exceeds the number of those on full time and fractional positions. In 2004, Anne Junor estimated that, by head count, 40 % of academic staff

were casual employees (see Junor 2004, p. 276). However, by 2010, this figure had reached 60 % with 67,000 academic staff employed on a casual basis in the Australian university system (see May et al. 2011, p. 194).<sup>1</sup> The ostensible rationale for casualisation is to give universities the ability to maximise workforce flexibility. University bureaucrats—notably human resources managers and financial officers—frequently recite the narrative of market risk, of increased competition for students and volatile enrolments, in seeking to justify employing more and more workers on precarious contracts. This has profoundly undermined academic job security and has brought to academia the levels of precariousness characteristic of careers in, for example, the creative industries (see Morgan et al. 2013), where the number of core workers is shrinking with a rapid growth in the peripheral labour force (see Kimber 2003). Indeed, over the last decade only 20 % of all jobs created in Australian universities have been continuing, relatively secure positions (see Department of Education and Training 2014a). Discussing the rapidly ageing profile of the academic workforce, Graeme Hugo wrote of the ‘lost generation’ of academics (Hugo 2005). When tenured staff resign or retire, universities will invariably replace them with casual or short-contract appointees.

Casual staff experience is the condition of the enervated precarity that has become a structural feature of contemporary universities, and which mirrors the wider social and economic relations of late modernity, when new capitalism is restless, competitive and turbulent, undermining job security and the possibility that durable skills can be slowly accrued in fixed communities of practice. Members of the academic precariat, or cognitariat, are unable to make plans, purchase property or start a family. Their dependence on the continued patronage of tenured mentors in offering them work undermines their ability to become politically active in challenging the system of creeping casualisation that maintains them in poverty and powerlessness.

Despite clear evidence of the declining investment in universities, Tony Abbott’s conservative Liberal National Coalition government, elected in 2013, announced that it would be fiscally unsustainable to maintain the growth of the university sector under the existing arrangement. In its first budget, in May 2014, it announced a plan to let universities set their own

<sup>1</sup>These are informed estimates only. Researchers have struggled to obtain adequate data on casual staffing in universities.

fees, despite having made no mention of such a plan in the lead-up to the election. The government introduced the deregulation legislation in 2014, but was not able to pass it.<sup>2</sup> This precipitated a public debate, not only on the weight of student debt that the changes would generate, but also on the social, economic and cultural roles that universities should properly perform and on the very principles that should inform their operation. The debate illustrated the extent to which Australian higher education had become an issue of mass public concern, probably for the first time. It also brought to light the corporate character of universities, many of which have annual turnovers of more than one billion dollars, and often appear to be fixated on revenues and competition more than on their traditional role as centres of independent learning and research.

The fee-setting debate also laid bare the political rifts within the universities: the growing divide between, on the one hand, the vice chancellors and their governing bodies (made up largely of business and political appointees) and, on the other hand, the wider university communities. The Education minister who introduced the fee deregulation legislation, Christopher Pyne, claimed that his government's proposed reforms had the support of the universities. This was based on the fact that Universities Australia, peak body of Australian vice chancellors, expressed conditional approval for deregulation of fees.<sup>3</sup> Pyne thus constructed the vice chancellors as the sole legitimate channel through which university opinion could be represented. This was based on a narrowly corporatist view of the university. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore the contradictions inherent in the neoliberal university, and the tensions between scholarly communities and university managers.

## THE RISE OF THE REMOTE TECHNOCRATS

Historically, universities were comprised of guilds of scholars, self-governing communities, both clannish and inscrutable, who fiercely resisted external control. Even at their foundation, Australian universities varied considerably from this model provided by the ancient European universities.

<sup>2</sup>As at July 2015. The government did not control the Senate, where a group of cross-bench and Greens Senators held the balance of power. The government was not able to persuade enough of them to support the legislation.

<sup>3</sup>But not, it should be pointed out, for the 20 % cut in government funding that came along with the proposed power to set fees.

In the colonies, the first universities were established in the mid-nineteenth century and were bound to the modern mission of educating the colonial mandarin class rather than simply reproducing the Oxbridge model of cloistered dons pursuing the study of classics, law, philosophy, science and religion. Nevertheless, the sense of scholarly independence and academic freedom ran very deep, and academic communities resisted external political and ecclesiastical interference.

Over the last 25 years, however, there has been an erosion of the traditional idea of the university as a loose federation of scholarly communities, in favour of the corporate line-management model. University managerialism began to emerge in the 1980s and developed unevenly across the sector. Peter Karmel, the vice chancellor of the Australian National University from 1982 to 1987, a respected, though quite conservative public administrator, wrote cautiously in 1990 about the complex relationship between managers and scholars:

[A]uthority within the university is intellectual authority. This is necessarily dispersed among the senior academic staff. The Vice-Chancellor and senior administrators may administer the resources and may, subject to the governing body, determine the broad policies, but intellectual authority does not reside in them. Moreover, the quality of a university comes from the work of many autonomous academics or groups of them. It follows from this that a university cannot be run like a business enterprise with a chief executive in command, seeking to maximise relatively simple variables. Consultative processes are essential and, while leadership is of great importance, such leadership must be consensual. Notwithstanding this, the modern university is usually a large complex organisation. As such it needs to be 'managed'. Thus tension between collegial and managerial styles is bound to be chronic. (Karmel 1990, p. 332)

As funding declined, however, the tensions identified by Karmel were exacerbated. This was particularly the case in the newer universities. While the prestige of the older institutions generated more student demand, research grants and alumni endowments, the institutions formed under the Dawkins reforms were generally more financially tenuous. In general terms, they have increased student-staff ratios, class sizes and the level of casualisation in their workforces more quickly than their more established counterparts.

The newer universities were also the first places where scholarly communities came most directly under threat, and where the traditional

disciplines were most vulnerable. If business studies attracted more students and research funding than anthropology, then the anthropologists were more quickly called on to justify their continued tenure. Those who had traditionally served as collegial representatives, heads of department, found themselves increasingly compromised. They were caught between their colleagues, frustrated at the erosion of their working conditions, and senior managers who demanded that they perceive themselves not as scholarly representatives, the collegial voice issuing upwards, but as line managers charged with implementing the policies devised by increasingly remote oligarchs, operating like corporate CEOs. The established practice of the scholarly groups and departments electing their heads from among their number has been widely replaced by managerial selection of external people for these roles. Managers have used the technique of institutional restructuring, and increasing the scale of academic units, to break down the power of disciplinary and scholarly ties, often using the progressive pretext that they are seeking to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, rather than to create economies of scale. The resultant structural upheaval allowed university managers to leave their institutional mark and enhance their career prospects.

Over the last 20 years, there has been a noticeable narrowing of the disciplinary base from which senior university managers are drawn. While, for example, in 1996 Australian vice chancellors included people with backgrounds in human geography, history, English literature and linguistics, by 2015 none of these disciplines was represented, nor was any other discipline in the humanities.<sup>4</sup> Most university heads were drawn from science, law, business or engineering. Those from the social sciences come from a narrow range of backgrounds, ones that could be seen as peculiarly suited careers in university management: economics, education, educational psychology and public policy.<sup>5</sup> While nearly a quarter of undergraduate students are enrolled in courses defined as ‘society and culture’ (excluding education) and ‘creative arts’ (Department of Education and Training 2014b), these fields are conspicuously underrepresented among the vice chancellors.

There are four reasons for this. First, due to the professionalisation of university management, selection committees favour those whose

<sup>4</sup>Warren Bebbington of the University of Adelaide, however, is from a music education background.

<sup>5</sup>Sandra Harding of James Cook University in Queensland is an economic sociologist by training.



backgrounds seem appropriate to the idea of a university as a business rather than as a cultural institution. Second, the fading of the notion that university leaders should perform the function of collegial representatives works against the participation of those in the humanities and social sciences among whom the idea of democratic university has strong support. Third, labour markets in the humanities and social sciences are much tighter than those in most professional or vocational training disciplines, such as law and medicine, where there are viable career options outside of academia; it is easier for accountants and engineers to find non-academic work than for philosophers and sociologists. This is why those in the humanities and social sciences can be enslaved to years of casual labour, while those who can find work outside academia will be more inclined to walk away if they are unable to obtain secure work. Additionally, having obtained tenure, it is much more difficult to achieve promotion in the humanities or social sciences, where higher standards of achievement are often expected; Australian historians get nowhere on research achievements that would qualify them for a professorial position in a law or accounting faculty. So it stands to reason that those in the humanities and social sciences are usually much older by the time they reach the level of seniority required to progress to management ranks and have less time to ascend the hierarchy. Finally, and fourth, the more corporate values become embedded in university bureaucracy, the more repugnant the managerial career path appears to those who have trained in disciplines that encourage critical reflection on social institutions and ideologies. The result of this narrowing of the managerial caste to people from outside the humanities and social sciences means that there is less chance that some kind of sociological imagination will be brought to bear on the running of universities than was the case in the past. While familiarity with the ideas of Michel Foucault and Max Weber might not equip you to read a balance sheet or draw up a plausible flow chart, it will certainly give you a keen understanding of the social and intellectual consequences of introducing a new set of key performance indicators.

### TAMING MANAGERIALISM: BEYOND THE TAYLORIST UNIVERSITY

When a culture contents itself with Transparency and Information as insipidly neutral and impoverished surrogates for truth-seeking and knowledge-making, then we start to lose sight of what the university is actually for,

and to lose sight of its proper commitments. The Official University – the transparent one, replete with information – has not only eviscerated but also threatened with extinction the institution where serious work goes on. That institution, if it is to survive, has had to become clandestine. (Docherty 2011)

The suffocating consequences of the line-management system and the corporate model of the university are well known to academics: the undermining of independent scholarship and critical thought; the growth of official regulation and surveillance of various aspects of academic work; the obsession with metrics and key performance indicators of dubious value; the proliferation of administrative demands that diminish the time available for real scholarship; the subordination of intellectual work to financial imperatives; and the Orwellian paradox that the marketing rhetoric of ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’ intensifies, just as the conditions of learning and teaching are undermined. Academics frequently experience these processes as inexorable and difficult to resist. Many simply try to do good work in the shadows—staffing what Thomas Docherty calls the ‘unseen academy’. They either jump through the managerial hoops or engage in passive resistance and non-compliance, but rarely offer an open challenge to the discourses and processes that trammel them. The task of challenging managerialism is formidable and generally left to a shrinking pool of activists.

Ironically, however, at the very moment that the cherished values of intellectual freedom, liberal humanism and critical theory appear most stifled by bureaucrats and technocrats, managerialism itself is suffering a crisis of legitimacy. Not only is it ineffective in its own terms, it is also anachronistic, out of step with contemporary management orthodoxy. In order to understand this, it is important to situate the contemporary university in relation to the development of capitalism over the last 100 years.

Taylorism emerged in the early-twentieth century as a scientific management creed in the service of Fordist mass production (see Braverman 1974). It sought to achieve greatest efficiency by breaking down the production process to its smallest components, instituting a highly refined division of labour where workers perform specialised but alienating and repetitive tasks. But Taylorism was also a political project geared towards undermining the skills and solidarity of blue-collar trades and locating the scientific manager at the centre of the productive universe. In Fordist enterprises, white-collar workers grew in number and power at the expense

of those on the production line. However, the enterprises of the Fordist era were brittle and inflexible. They were good for producing standardised outputs based on the uniformity of production, but not suitable for the agile, fluid and creative processes of new capitalism.

With the decline of funding over the last 25 years, managers in higher education have used Taylorist strategies to break down the intellectual guilds and engage in more direct bureaucratic surveillance and regulation of academic work, especially associated with undergraduate teaching. The constant round of institutional restructuring has eroded collegial bonds, while the quantification of performance (through, e.g., student satisfaction surveys) and the proliferation of policies and paperwork intrude profoundly on academic work. The cost-saving changes rolled out across the university sector—increasing class sizes, casualisation, standardising course structures and diminishing student choice—are symptoms of Taylorism and the increasing power of the managerial class. Only three of Australia's thirty-six public universities—Monash, Sydney and Queensland—today employ more academic than non-academic staff, and in several of the newer universities the latter outnumber the former by nearly two to one (see Department of Education and Training 2014a).

Yet in the Western world the time of the scientifically managed corporate behemoth has passed. In the post-Fordist era, the line-managed, bureaucratically rigid university is a profound anachronism. It contrasts starkly with the 'Montessori' styles of management typical of new capitalism. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) argued that capitalism has great capacity for renewal in the face of critique. They saw the emergence of what they called 'the new spirit of capitalism' in response to the post-1968 creative dissent. This was typified by a popular rejection of standardised consumption, moral conformity and, in particular, Taylorised alienated labour. So innovation and creativity became the leitmotifs of new capitalism, which sought to conscript ludic pursuits and intellectual free play and generate the 'new oil' of intellectual property. Old management techniques with their modernist social engineering ambitions simply crush the spontaneity required for the creative juices to flow. Indeed, some new technology corporations, such as Apple and Google, have constructed new workplaces that they are calling campuses, in order to encourage a sort of Ivy League student creativity (guided no doubt by the legend of Mark Zuckerberg's development of Facebook while at Harvard). Ironically, this is occurring just as campus life in Australia is becoming increasingly bereft of vitality, with students rushing off after lectures to work in shops or

restaurants to cover living expenses and student debt, and casual staff, who do much of the teaching, leaving when their classes finish.

So there is a need for a creative renewal of the university. The justification for it, however, is not (I hasten to add) in the production of the next generation of tech entrepreneurs, but rather in the recognition of the need to rescue intellectual life from bureaucratic and technocratic suffocation. This project involves challenging the idea that education is simply a credentialing process, and striving to renew liberal humanist values. This is a formidable task. As youth unemployment increases throughout the Western world, and the labour market advantages that a university education can confer become less and less apparent, so popular anxieties about the vocational prospects of young people intensify. Disciplines and degrees that appear to provide little vocational leverage are often the first to have their value questioned. This is of course not new. In Australia, the humanities and liberal arts were called to account around the Dawkins restructuring of higher education in the late 1980s. Around that time, Ian Hunter wrote that the transcendental justification for the humanities—that they promote individual cultural growth—is insufficient. He argued that they play a ‘quite calculable and interested role’ in forming the ethical citizens and that it is necessary to engage in public debates to advocate that role: ‘Drawn irresistibly towards transcendental conceptions of culture and reason, the humanities academy has itself failed to develop a public rationale outlining the pragmatic ethical and social function that it supports’ (Hunter 1989, p. 447).

The humanities and social sciences should play a central role in this project, but for this to happen the practitioners in these fields ought to overcome the embattled, cloistered and introspective disposition within the university and to deny university managers the prerogative of representing the views of university communities. It is important to recall the scholarly radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s, when the campuses were centres of political ferment and when many academics were powerful public intellectuals. In recent times, there has been an attenuation of political engagement in general. Precariousness has also limited scholarly horizons and ambitions: a gentle nudge to public policy here, an incremental contribution to some scholarly sub-specialism there. But this quietism, and in particular the evasion of thorny questions of the politics of the university, can make critical thinkers vulnerable to the predations of neoliberalism by failing to engage in the debates about the social and cultural roles played by universities.

The prospects of advocating the virtues of a general education are perhaps enhanced by the failure of the managerial university to secure successful employment outcomes for graduates. Regarding the humanities and their lack of vocational utility, Hunter claimed that the link between the vocational training and national economic performance is by no means clear. Recent reports on graduate outcomes found that nearly 30 % had no job 4 months after graduating (see Dodd and Tadros 2014). As career paths erode, even established professions—law, architecture, journalism—have seen a rapid drop off in demand for graduates. While in 2012 83 % of law graduates found employment within 4 months, the next year the percentage fell to 78.5 (see Dodd and Tadros 2014). If these trends continue, they will belie the arguments of those who seek to justify higher student fees on the basis that degrees confer private individual gain. They also betoken the failure of university technocrats to deliver on their promises—in particular of shoehorning students into the vocational niches for which the Taylorist ‘mass production’ university prepared them.

## CONCLUSION

The creation of the mass university in Australia was accompanied by the rise of the technocratic oligarchs, imbued with the ideas of new public management, who profoundly changed the character of universities. They have imposed systems of line management and regular rounds of structural change on disciplinary communities, the effect of which was to undermine the collegial voice in university decision-making. This has narrowed the disciplinary base from which university managers are drawn. Many from the humanities and social sciences who in an earlier era might have been prepared to perform the role of collegial representatives are reluctant to be line managers in the contemporary neoliberal university. In dealing with the rapid growth in undergraduate enrolments and the relative decline in the funding base, university managers sought to adopt Taylorist solutions, tightly managing the conditions under which pedagogy and research were practised, and effecting economies of scale that have diminished many of the freedoms and qualities of academic life. Unlike many of their mid-twentieth century predecessors, staff in fields that are best placed to extol the values of critical and liberal scholarship have in recent times been reluctant to critically engage with the contemporary neoliberal university. Crusading researchers and public intellectuals, who fight for social justice and good causes outside academia, will often remain mute on university

politics and the capricious exercise of managerial power. They are guilty of petrified silence, glum defeatism or the blind acceptance of the ‘there is no alternative’ injunctions of neoliberal dogma. Either way, they evacuate the terrain of the politics of higher education at a time when the foundations of critical thinking and scholarship are most under threat. Contemporary economic conditions have undermined the idea that the university is a conveyor belt to a vocation, and thus rendered problematic the Taylorist and technocratic vision of higher education. At such a moment it is important to hear the expression of a broader vision of universities, voices capable of describing the value of education in terms other than individual and instrumental ones.

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