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The threat to Australian higher education from a lack of open internal criticism and the silencing of dissent

There are many ways we can try and understand the sense of crisis that has beset Australian universities. They include: poor governance, financial mismanagement, the overuse of consultancies, an unhealthy obsession with metrics, a loss of academic freedom, a diminishing regard for, and support of, research-led teaching, and a plummeting staff morale.

A thread common to them all, however, is the lack of comprehensive and easily available information on how our universities are now run. As a result, neither academic staff nor the wider public, including our elected members of parliament, can easily interrogate and critique the work of senior university management. Thus, to take one example, the issue of the over-use and underpayment of casual academic staff led the Deputy Fair Work Ombudsman, Rachel Volzke to lay blame on a campus culture in which ‘underpayments were rarely raised directly by underpaid employees’ or were ignored as if there was no genuine managerial responsibility.¹ Staff employed in such a precarious manner are, in any event, already in a weak position to query managerial decisions and behaviour as they run the risk of losing any employment with the university if they do so.

This lack of managerial transparency has been accompanied by a decline in genuine staff participation in substantive policy decisions pertinent to teaching and research. When academic staff—who are ultimately responsible for shaping and delivering that teaching and research—are unable to access, let alone meaningfully control university decision-making processes, or properly assess the ‘evidence’ used to support them, they can no longer decisively influence the character or direction of their work. Here too, there is also a strong inbuilt incentive for academics *not* to do so, for fear of losing sessional employment or internal budgetary support, and other forms of internal patronage driven from above.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jun/05/australian-universities-accused-of-entrenched-non-compliance-with-workplace-law-over-staff-underpayment>

The change in institutional culture and purpose, however, has been profound. As noted in a recent op-ed for *The Australian's* Higher Education section drawing on his recent book *Mind of the Nation* (2023), the University of Melbourne's deputy vice-chancellor (global, culture and engagement), Michael Wesley, our university education has been deflected away from its proper purpose, to 'teach our students how to think – critically, curiously, open-mindedly' rather than merely 'what to think, in the form of specific skills.'²

Academic employees no longer have access to the kinds of information that allow them to effectively interrogate the stark differences that have now arisen between academic values and the day-to-day culture they now face on campus (Tregear 2020; Sims 2020; Ross 2021). Federal and State governments have also failed to encourage or enforce a truly accountable managerial class for our universities. Instead, institutionalised gaslighting has become the norm.

As Wesley also observes, this is no mere 'academic' problem. Our universities are given a privileged place in our society, he argues, because they are supposed to support teaching and research in the service of the pursuit of truth and the generation and dissemination of public knowledge. In so doing, academics are specifically trained to question blanket assumptions and fallacious arguments as a professional *sine qua non*. This simply cannot be done if sources of information are suspect or non-existent (Fish 2017). University managers, indeed, now typically operate beneath an unhealthy and unacademic veil of secrecy.

This situation has arisen in no small part because university managers no longer envision their primary objective as leading their institutions principally for the acquisition and dissemination of public knowledge. The very values that an academic might seek routinely to uphold in their pursuit of such knowledge, such as a commitment to reason, objectivity, public responsibility, and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, can therefore now be routinely compromised, thwarted, trivialised, or dismissed by managers who are prone to confuse their interests with the public-good purpose of academic work. Corporate-managerial priorities can now be imposed unchallenged upon a sphere of activity that is by its nature foreign to it.

One particularly insidious example is the rise in the use of so-called 'gagging' clauses (such as non-disclosure agreements) in academic employment agreements to silence academic staff who seek to raise legitimate criticism of their own institution. As the Peter Ridd case at James Cook University (2020) demonstrated, the fact that academics feel more and more fearful about asking questions about, let alone speaking openly about, the workings of their own institution, even in private emails and on social media or to journalists, has also served to diminish the standing of academics and their work more generally, for which academics themselves are not primarily responsible.

This amounts to a slow-burn disaster for the country, given the ever-rising need—in the face of challenges and threats to civil society emanating from the misuse of 'big data', fake news, and AI—for precisely the kind of 'disinterested', critical knowledge creation and validation that academics are meant to undertake. It undermines the fundamental pillars upon which not only our universities but our public life writ-large depend: trust, believability, integrity and the sanctity of truth.

² <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/education-minister-jason-clare-faces-big-challenges-in-higher-education/news-story/251d095305bf3c01cee0e886c9708d28>

Instead, as a matter of course, academics and the wider public should be able to access comprehensive information as a matter of course about how our universities are being run. Academics should also be able freely to speak out even when doing so involves criticism of their employers (Evans and Stone 2021). Whistleblowing of all kinds and levels of significance should be an axiomatic, even commonplace, academic practice, not the near-certain career-suicidal undertaking that it seems now to have become in Australia.

In the end, all of us, not just academics, have a profound stake in ensuring universities continue to be places of open and robust critical discourse and fundamentally committed to the pursuit of truth, including within its own walls.

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