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Beyond neoliberalism: Universities and the public good

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These are challenging times for public universities everywhere. Questions about their organisation, governance, financing, relations to society and the content of education they provide, while not new, have assumed a heightened urgency in political and policy circles in Australia and elsewhere. In Australia, the most recent measure of university reform was the ill-fated Higher Education Bill which proposed fee deregulation, a move welcomed by Vice Chancellors from the Group of Eight Universities. Several institutions acted pre-emptively to introduce further cuts to teaching budgets in anticipation of the bill. Whether a pragmatic necessity or a slick management ploy, the final victims have been students, cramped into already overcrowded tutorials and laboratories as academics (many on sessional or short term contracts) struggled to offer decent learning experiences.

The bill was defeated following collective action spearheaded by education unions. Support from a cross bench of senators was crucial. Worthy of special mention is that some senators who had not themselves received a university education opposed the bill because they believed that the electorate deserved the right to an affordable higher education.

Politicians’ talk of greater efficiency, productivity, performance and accountability has now been temporarily replaced by talk of innovation, calling on another set of established discourses—universities as drivers of a knowledge society and engines of economic growth (Glover 2015). The fundamental question remains unresolved, though: what are public universities for and what support can they call upon given the myriad demands on the public purse? How are market rationalities and market behaviours enabling public universities to serve the public good? What might be achieved by calling on comparative insights on university reforms? These and other questions on university governance have been pursued by Australian and international researchers over recent decades (see, for example, Davies & Bansel 2007; Larner & Le Heron 2007; Marginson & Considine 2000; Strathern 2003), and Learning under Neoliberalism: Ethnographies of Governance in Higher Education joins this substantial canon. Taking as their focus public universities in New Zealand, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States, the authors, drawn from the discipline of anthropology, offer rich accounts of how universities are governed and how they govern themselves. A fine-grained picture of learning and academic work in public universities emerges supported by policy readings, ethnographic vignettes and data gathered in interviews and through participant observation. Close attention is given to documenting the micropolitics of university reforms on the bodies and emotions of students and academic staff.

CENTRING CONTRADICTIONS: (UN)FREEDOMS, FANTASIES AND FEARS

The strongest contribution of this book is how it makes visible the contradictions inherent in the policies and practices within the neoliberalising university. This institution, it transpires, is not the productive, efficient enterprise reformers and university leaders claim to be creating. Rather it is an intensely bureaucratised and stratified space. Cris Shore (on New Zealand), and Susan Wright and Jakob Oberg (on Denmark) apply a policy anthropology approach to criticise the cultural practices in public universities in these two countries. With their ethnographies of academic life set in historical context, they offer a textured illustration of the power and resource relations that are shaping the performances and identities of academics. In his chapter on New Zealand, Shore identifies the growth of instrumental reasoning in students, which is unsurprising given that university managers are keen to see them as ‘customers’. The breakdown of collegiality and the crafty uses of metrics by ‘productive’ staff to extract more privileges that he describes are familiar and sobering. Wright and Oberg examine reforms to make Danish universities compatible with the Bologna Process to show how seemingly positive constructs such as ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’ become resources for the exercise of power by government ministers and state bureaucracies over the academic body. They conclude that reforms have weakened the civic responsibilities of Danish public universities.

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Most studies on university governance have shied away from taking stock of emotion and affect, focusing instead on macrostructures and processes which are taken to be unconnected to identities and bodies. In contrast, feminist-inspired research has analysed academic labour as a subset of forms of labour in the ‘New Economy’, and has documented the effects of various kinds of knowledge work on bodies and emotions. In this vein, John Clarke’s chapter examines the role of ‘fantasy’ in sustaining the neoliberalising university. He documents the emotional effects of such fantasies, paying particular attention to the various ‘dissociative states’ that increasingly shape academic working lives, from ‘privatised retreatism’, to scepticism, cynicism and melancholia. In a powerful auto-ethnographic account, in her chapter, Dana-Ain Davis shares her experiences of becoming a fearful subject, discouraged and penalised by institutional authorities in her attempts to find a space for Black Studies in the undergraduate curriculum in an American state university. The stakes are high—employment security or the extension of a precarious life of short-term contracts, described elsewhere as an ‘academic ponzi scheme’ (Croucher 2014).

As Rosalind Gill (2009) and others have argued, universities are not only rarefied havens of refined culture; they are also sites of endemic insecurities and outright exploitation. The precarious conditions of many early career and sessional academics are enabled by the complicity of well-placed, highly-paid staff in the upper echelons of university hierarchies. Deals made with research ‘stars’ who demand special conditions—above-market salaries, light teaching loads, a war chest of research funds—are often sealed without discussion with rank-and-file academics. They produce a polarised and stratified culture as Shore demonstrates in his contribution to Learning under Neoliberalism.

Contradictions also emerge in Susan Hyatt’s chapter—a case study of the challenges and rewards of articulating activist research scholarship with undergraduate teaching. Hers is a narrative of the hydra-headed university, which supports progressive programmes on the one hand, while aligning with private real estate developers to further the neoliberalisation of urban space on the other. These ‘town and gown’ relations help to produce employment to fill the void left by the flight of manufacturing industries, but they also reinforce the economic power of universities over local communities.

Cris Shore’s piece touches on the transnational aspirations of his employing university to become ‘world class’. This particular fantasy merits some comment, given its wider resonance, enabled by a large supporting cast of national governments, globe-trotting university executives and all kinds of consultants intent on educating university managers on how to gain a foothold in the ‘Top 100’. In a thoughtful analysis of global ranking regimes, Susan Robertson (2012) shows how mundane techniques to collate and manage data, and fashion ‘brand’ identities have the cumulative effect of bringing universities a step closer to becoming transnationalising corporate entities (see also Collins & Park 2015). Tellingly, a recent cross-national study shows that, in contrast to the views of university executives, prospective students and employer groups do not rely much on university rankings as a quality measure (Souto-Outero & Enders 2015). Global rankings are most likely to be used in those contexts where institutional capacity is poor in higher education. For Robertson, there is an urgent need to shift research attention away from the methodologies of rankings to chart new directions that help reimagine the university differently. She asks, ‘what if the idea of world-class education was totally engaged by questions about the quality of learning experiences for learners all over the world?’ (p. 237). Put another way, is it right that a public university should seek to imagine and fashion itself into ‘an analogue of a multinational corporation, a body with only a contingent, fiscal relationship to its country of residence?’ (Halliday 1999, p. 15). What of its civic responsibilities?

UNIVERSITIES AND THE PUBLIC GOOD

Learning under Neoliberalism re-visits a well-rehearsed argument—the fundamental importance of teaching if universities are to meet their civic and political responsibilities to train ethical and capable professionals and citizens. In his chapter, titled ‘To market, to market to buy a middle class life’, Vincent Lyon-Callo visits the emotional and economic insecurities of his students in the former industrial powerhouse, the American state of Michigan. He highlights the risk that some may invest in nascent fascism and xenophobia in the absence of hope. He is critical of institutional practices that treat students as informed customers seeking globally transposable skills to navigate an imagined ‘flat world’. There are no simple answers, no guarantees, he acknowledges, but teaching to inspire alternative imaginations is of utmost importance. Students need intellectual tools and practical skills to know, act and be different from prescribed market subjectivities—the convenience-seeking-customer, the rational, calculating, ‘flexible’ citizen or, more worryingly, the fearful xenophobe. The relentless drive to compete and compare is distracting universities from their responsibilities to

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impart knowledge, simulate critical reasoning and build the critical capabilities required by active citizens and competent, flexibly skilled professionals.

Performance measures to ‘improve the student experience’ are a case in point, a topic which is well canvassed in this volume. It goes without saying that pockets of lacklustre teaching persist and it is right to capture this in teaching evaluations. However, sub-optimal teaching evaluations may also be a student response to course content that is difficult and time consuming to master. The curriculum may require students to re-consider cherished values and assumptions, which might impinge on the professional power that they will exercise on graduating. Subject areas which present technical, intellectual and ethico-political challenges such as bioethics, Indigenous education, gender studies and the ‘hard sciences’, to name a few, are known for attracting sub-optimal evaluations. In this context, teaching evaluations can be experienced as having a dumbing down effect, while imposing disciplinary power over university teachers (see Hunter 2008; Rojstaczer & Healy 2012).

That maltreated, overworked academic staff might be cultivating ‘functional stupidity’ is a very real possibility as Alvesson argues in his trenchant critique of universities: ‘Functional stupidity is socially supported lack of reflexivity, substantive reasoning and justification. It entails a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and safe terrain of adaptation to, and exploitation of, a given social situation’ (2013, p. 216).

Performance measures designed to ensure accountability to student learning are also easily subverted by an increasingly individualistic, hypercompetitive academic culture in which research, however dull and uninspiring, is the main game and the road to securing job security and/or career advancement. Metrics gaming, is not restricted to automobile companies like VW; universities, too, are adroit players in this terrain, as Shore, Clarke, Wright and Orberg make clear in their respective chapters. While compliance, embellishment and gaming might be rewarded in our managed universities, it is the sociability, trustworthiness, careful and patient intellectual inquiry and fearless speech which further the public good. These qualities are occasionally recognised and rewarded but perhaps less often than they should be.

The survival of public universities depends on the support they get from the national societies that they are in. This is not to disparage the cross-national activities and cosmopolitan solidarities that have always been a feature of intellectual work. Rather, it is a reminder that global imaginings for ‘world class’ status cannot be sustained without national resources and without the support and endorsement of national communities. Credentialed, indebted graduates who have not enjoyed the benefits of rigorous, inspiring teaching are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of labour markets, and as Lyon-Callo shows in his chapter, this vulnerability is greatest for those students who are the first generation in their family to go to university.

Nor should a university’s civic responsibilities stop at national borders. We have a responsibility to educate the many international students we enrol in our institutions to the highest standards, so that they do acquire capabilities that serve them well in life and work. China’s Academy of Social Sciences estimates that close to a third of those studying abroad are from working-class families (Sharma 2013). These families erode their life savings in the hope of educating their children overseas to improve their life prospects. Vanessa Fong’s moving ethnographic study, Paradise Redefined, captures their hopes and disappointments and gives us reason to reconsider what has been gained and lost by taking an industry approach to ‘international education’.

‘RESTORING THE SCHOLARLY BALANCE’

What could be done by universities to chart a different set of relations to mediate the interests of states, markets and citizens in ways that foster the public good? Exemplary ‘world class universities’ such as Stanford and MIT bear witness to the complex navigations and compromises arising from their collaborations with industrial corporations (Lowen 1997). These go back at least to the start of the twentieth century before the advent of the Bayh-Dole Act introduced under the Reagan administration, a starting point for many higher education researchers of neoliberalism. More recently, the close relations between Japanese research universities and TEPCO, the operator of the Fukushima nuclear reactor, have opened up debates about the autonomy of researchers to be frank and fearless in the face of university support for engagements with large corporations (Ishikawa, Fujii & Moehle, p. 7). Debates of this kind are important to make visible the potentially dystopian effects of the power-knowledge couplet.

If market logics have blunted the capabilities of universities to incubate critical thought and ethical action, we should also be wary of an imagined golden past. Women, working class students and the culturally different did
not fare particularly well in the statist nation-building universities (Larner & Le Heron 2007). As instruments of Empire, universities provided the intellectual rationalities for imperialisms. It is now acknowledged that several modern disciplines including geography, statistics, anthropology and sociology have their origins in Europe’s colonial encounters (Connell 2007).

Writing almost twenty years ago, Clare O’Farrell made the prescient observation that: ‘the State has become educationally out of date. [It] must necessarily fall behind those institutions whose job it is to keep abreast with and create new developments in specialised fields [such as] universities’ (1996, p. 8). O’Farrell highlighted the need for academics to find alternative ways of self-governing. Her compelling argument, in favour of winding back the intrusion and displacement wrought by various accountability audits to restore ‘the scholarly balance’, retains its urgency. A small step towards this end is by attending to professional and democratic accountability in university governance. Such changes are necessary if universities are to continue to be relevant to public life. By focusing on the social dynamics within universities, Learning under Neoliberalism forces us to re-consider how academics are entangled in webs of surveillance, discipline and self-interest. It makes a strong case for redirecting academic labour to further the public interest.

Notwithstanding its many strengths, some of the book’s chapters veer towards an over-investment in the explanatory power of neoliberalism. The question of whether quite different political projects of reform, across vastly different institutional and national contexts, can be attributed to neoliberalism is contestable, and is taken up in the Afterword where Greenwood brings to bear his lived experiences of 44 years in the academy. He drives home the importance of a situated, historical analysis in any intellectual project seeking to understand higher education reforms, observing that ‘issues such as censoring and controlling academic teaching and research, gentrification and the privileging of elites are [not] problems uniquely associated with neoliberalism’ (p. 205). Boone Shear and Angelina Zontine’s chapter goes part of the way towards questioning the neoliberalism metanarrative by calling for the use of ‘weak theories’ to foster an alternative politics.

Is there a case for decentring the neoliberalism narrative as Larner and Le Heron (2007) have argued? Could the possibilities for resisting market rationalities and practices in higher education be greater if we take neoliberalism to be a less coherent and more fragmented project, one assembled in local sites through practices, techniques, metaphors, discourses and prescribed identities (see Lewis 2012)? Might the black box of ‘globalisation’ and global comparability regimes also be submitted to careful ethnographic scrutiny? For too long, a place-less and agent-less ‘globalisation’ and ‘neoliberalism’ have been invoked to explain the marketisation of higher education. It might be timely to begin with the everyday lives and performances of educators and managers in ‘world class’ universities to arrive at a better understanding of the reciprocal relations between local, national and global. This could be a starting point for re-thinking what a new social compact might look like and the responsibilities of universities towards this end.

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