

What Place for Scholars in the Academic Zoo?

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In April 2009 I formally retired from academic life after a career of some 36 years. My decision to retire as early as sixty was in the first instance a matter of health and lifestyle after a repeat encounter with cancer. Yet it was no less a personal protest at the erosion of intellectual and collegial life in Australian universities and the worsening indifference to my own declining field of Asian Studies.

While I had not as a PhD student intended to pursue an academic career, it soon became my true vocation. I delighted in the opportunities and privileges of university life and tried to live up to the high standards set by my teachers and colleagues. From my late twenties I never sought to be other than an academic and a scholar and imagined that I would remain so for the rest of my life. I have not ceased to be a scholar and an intellectual but I decided I no longer wished to endure the constant insult to my intelligence and the disregard of scholarship and simple decency that have become the norm in academic life. On retirement I was shocked to find how palpable was my relief. Clearly it was the right personal decision. Sadly I find that I am not alone among colleagues in their sixties. But what of like-minded colleagues who still work in universities or young students who are contemplating such a career? *Sauve qui peut* is practical but hardly ethical advice.

Perhaps lazily, I used to think of academics and scholars as one and the same. It may now be important to distinguish between them. I first did so a month after retirement when I passed through the Customs & Immigration checkpoint en route to Japan. Faced with the decision as to whether to self-identify as 'academic' or 'retired', I chose the latter for want of any better option. *Academics*, in the sense

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we now use the term, are the teaching and research staff of the corporate university and must perform their required duties subject to monitoring and appraisal. *Scholars* are curious, free-thinking individuals who seek knowledge and delight in sharing it with others through teaching, writing and public debate. The relationship between scholars and universities has always been fraught and so it should be. There is always a price to be paid for subsistence and it rises with prosperity and security. The more the university and society pays, the more it expects. Scholars invariably must compromise, as must artists and artisans. Yet there is also a point beyond which they cannot compromise without degrading their own traditions and values, that is the integrity of scholarship itself.

This little paper is a therefore a personal protest. Having known what it is to be an intellectual yeoman, freely giving of my labour, I do not wish to become an intellectual worker subject to petty monitoring and coercion. I do not wish to be industrialised and, in a post-industrial society, there is no reason to accept such a fate. As a scholar, I retain my curiosity, the habit of independent thought, and a passion for enlightenment. In the following I consider why I joined academia at a lucky time, the baleful trends in teaching, research and ethics, and the future prospects.

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First a bit of history. Australia's 1960s (when I became a student) and 1970s (when I became an academic) were in hindsight a halcyon time. Publicly funded universities were expanding rapidly, teaching staff were in demand, increasingly well paid and enjoyed substantial autonomy in governing themselves. This began to change in the 1980s with the Dawkins reform. The pressures of tighter public funding, greater accountability and closer monitoring along with demands for higher all-round productivity have since become relentless. A higher and higher price is being demanded for academic salaries, accompanied by a steady erosion of the quality of academic life. What reinforces it is the bureaucratisation of universities themselves with armies of non-academic staff impinging more and more upon academic roles and academic autonomy. At the same time, department heads and deans are ceasing to be colleagues as they are

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incorporated into a top-down managerial structure that seeks to monitor and control. VCs, DVCs and PVCs, trying to manage unwieldy bureaucracies and squeezed between unsympathetic governments and their student base, are struggling to keep a grip on reality. In a public forum on the future of Australian universities, I once asked Melbourne's then Vice Chancellor, Professor Alan Gilbert, for his view on the bureaucratisation of academic life and its impact on collegiality. Hoping for a thoughtful answer, I was disappointed to say the least when he replied that with increasing scale he regarded it as inevitable. What we have ended up with is sometimes referred to as 'managerialism'. I see it as an even cruder Taylorist input-output approach to teaching and research that seeks to quantify academic outputs, translate them into productivity, and apply rewards and sanctions to individual performance based not on scholarly contribution but upon fairly meaningless and impersonal metrics. This is intellectual purgatory.

Teaching

The reform of universities took as one of its starting assumptions that there was a systemic problem of poor teaching. With one notable exception, this was not my experience as either a student or staff member. I suspect that it traces back to the deep-seated Australian antagonism towards teachers and a foolish belief that it is the role of teachers to make learning easy. Nevertheless, quality of teaching surveys were mandated. In my experience, these have been poorly designed and statistically absurd. For reasons of confidentiality, there is no identification of a student's year or field of study, academic performance, English proficiency or gender. No correlations or analysis are possible. It is cruder than an opinion poll and open to manipulation. Where it bites is its use to evaluate promotion. Responses to the question "This subject was well taught" are tabulated and anything that falls below the average is regarded as a problem, without regard to circumstances and blithe disregard of the mathematics of an average. Consequently, there is great incentive for lecturers to dumb down, spoon feed and give good results on final assignments. Teaching is a skill and there are good ways of improving it but the bureaucratisation of "teaching and learning" is focused on

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statistical illusion rather than the complexities of a genuine learning environment. Much of what is now held to be teaching (the devil take whoever invented Powerpoint) is not learning in the sense of independent thinking but a new and more technologically sophisticated rote leaning.

Research

Just as teaching and learning are becoming strangers to each other, so too are research and knowledge. Research as an activity is measured by inputs (\$ value of research grants) and outputs (publications in leading journals, number of citations, etc.). Both metrics are now the basis of academic appointments and promotions, as even assessments and rankings of entire universities. Research grants can assist research, especially where they include teaching relief, but the pressure to maximise grant earnings means that academics are pushed to become involved in too many projects and make them more elaborate than really necessary, at least in the Social Sciences.

The biggest problem arises with publications. There is nothing new about the imperative of 'publish or perish' but we have moved into a new era where administrators no longer bother themselves with assessing 'scholarly contribution' but focus upon arbitrary metrics. The noose has been made very tight indeed. The result is a set of perverse incentives that undermine scholarship and skew appointment and promotion. First, what matters is quantity, not quality. The pressure to publish results as quickly as possible is not conducive to thorough research and biases effort towards the superficial. Second, and intended as a corrective, there is the pressure to publish in 'top tier' journals. Yet it is statistically impossible for a minority to be larger than a minority, so a lot of people must fail to do so. The result of universities imposing such requirements has been frantic efforts by journals to establish themselves as 'top tier', escalating submission rates for those which succeed, and enormous waste of academic time in rejecting papers. The old idea that one submitted to an appropriate journal and a good paper would find its level had much to commend it. Now the competitive market is reduced to multiple oligopolies, many of which exercise a stultifying

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effect upon their field because of their power to reinforce a favoured paradigm, however flawed. Third, there is a heavy bias against area studies and multidisciplinary research. Impact factors privilege mainstream journals with large readership and fields with large numbers of researchers. Finally, scholarly books (as opposed to textbooks) are losing ground as too difficult to quantify. Faculties and departments are losing their ability and even interest in evaluating scholarly contributions. Quantity and impact are what matter. All this makes academic life much more stressful and frustrating, especially for young academics looking to confirmation or promotion.

Ethics

Researchers used to be given basic guidelines for fieldwork and were expected to take personal responsibility for the welfare of their subjects and the reputation of their university. Following upon problems in the field of medicine, research is now presumed to be *prima facie* problematic and academics are no longer seen as reliable or “ethical” in the absence of close monitoring. University ethics committees now subject applications to minute, nit-picking bureaucratic scrutiny, then often impose requirements that are inappropriate to field conditions. Researchers are thereby deprived of autonomy and responsibility in favour of strict expectations of compliance. Australian Research Council grants mandate it. Yet the system is unenforceable. Universities do not have the resources to monitor the daily behaviour of researchers in the field, or the way the data are manipulated. Nor is peer review anything but erratic. All it achieves is to ensure that if anything goes wrong, if anyone protests, that universities can sheet home the blame and take disciplinary action against the relevant academic(s). In short, it protects bureaucratic arses. This compliance-driven monitoring does not encourage research, nor lead to better research or better outcomes. It does waste a lot of time and resources and it actually encourages academics to behave unethically in ignoring or finding creative ways around stupid or impractical requirements. This is not to say that research does not involve ethical dilemmas. Of course it does and researchers need from student days to be trained in how to recognise and address them. Some faculties and some universities do this quite

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well. But in the end it still boils down to being a matter of personal responsibility. Taking away personal responsibility and demanding compliance is not ethics but the pretence of it.

Collegiality

University noticeboards carry posters warning against bullying in the workplace. HR (Human Resources) departments put everyone on notice – everyone, that is, except the managers themselves. There are departments, faculties and whole universities where top-down bullying is so much part of the organisational culture that it goes unrecognised and unchecked. Clear thinking and plain speaking are not welcome if they contradict the official line and there are sanctions for doing so. Collegiality is honoured in the abstract but not when academics challenge department, faculty or university policy. This applies especially to the periodic reorganisations and restructurings to which university managers are so inclined. These give managers enormous discretionary power to promote their own interests and favourites to the disadvantage of others. The system of annual reviews and appraisals has its merits but it is also very open to abuse and almost impossible to appeal, especially by staff on the cusp of confirmation or promotion. Heads of department and deans can easily disguise victimisation by arbitrary metrics. The outcome may be not collegiality but suspicion and fear, interpersonal bitterness, opportunism and rampant hypocrisy.

What makes the situation so difficult is that rather few academics are well suited by inclination, training or experience to be good managers. Engagement in isolated intellectual activity combined with teaching undergraduate classes is poor preparation to manage departments and faculties with multi-million-dollar budgets and complex strategic challenges. Some are good at decision-making but most are not. Nor are academics themselves easy to manage. While they believe in collegiality, they are not necessarily good at it. Finally, appointment and promotion tend to emphasise academic performance rather than test any high-level management skills. In interviews, as the saying has it, 'bullshit baffles brains'. Academics who are promoted beyond their level of managerial competence

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tends to play favourites, discriminate against those who disagree with them, and withhold information, all very damaging to the quality of the academic environment, which can quite quickly become toxic. The trouble is that these problems are difficult to diagnose and resolve without the administration itself coming under challenge. Which brings us back to a high tolerance for official bullying.

Where to from here?

Is there still something to hope for in academia? One ray of hope is intensive teaching. Best practice at postgraduate level is now to condense 12 teaching weeks of 3 hours per week into one to two weeks of intensive interaction and run subjects sequentially instead of concurrently. This is demanding on both lecturers and students but it allows for more innovative teaching, sustained concentration and learning, and frees up many weeks for academics to better organise their time and focus on research.

An underlying problem, however, is that not all academics are suited to be or want to be scholars. Post-Dawkins, all university academics are *obliged* to be both teachers and researchers, a nexus insisted upon by the tertiary-sector union (NTEU). This has diminished university teaching as an honourable occupation in its own right, with particular harm to language teaching, and led to a terrible waste of resources in trivial research. Moreover, it is very bad for scholarship, indeed its very antithesis, to pretend that all research is necessarily scholarship. The essence of scholarship, in my view, is to ask big questions and, along with sound methodology, to apply some imagination in the search for answers. It is a creative endeavour and, like other creative pursuits, by its nature runs in fits and starts. Exploring new literatures, new sources and perhaps also new languages is an investment of time and effort that cannot be expected to yield immediate results. As scientists well know, exploring the unknown has its dead ends and disappointments. A book may take years to come to fruition. There are lean years when one plugs away and glorious years when one reaps the harvest. A prudent scholar-academic tries to avoid putting all his/her eggs in the one basket, so

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that there is always some flow of papers and publications. Nevertheless, it is not a metronomic assembly line.

Perhaps I have been prejudiced by far too many tedious seminars in economics and management where discussion of pseudo-scientific papers bogs down in matters of statistical method while meaning is ignored. Computers have made it easy to mine data sets for papers that seek to display technical virtuosity but are unreadable and insubstantial. PhDs are virtually obliged to apply statistical techniques, so that they study only that which can be quantified. The empirical data are of course derived from questionnaire surveys that embody the researcher's starting assumptions (often implicit), establish a barrier between researcher and subject that prevents those assumptions from being challenged – or indeed anything much useful being found out at all – and are then analysed from a 10-20% rate of return. The results are presented in papers that follow a predictable format of introduction, methodology, results, discussion, limitations and conclusion. Few of these papers contribute anything useful to knowledge. They are not in any sense scholarly, just mechanical exercises that achieve some recognition and serve the immediate purpose of appointment and promotion. Taylor would be delighted.

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Though I think it an unlikely development in anti-elitist Australia, I believe we should break the complusory nexus between teaching and research, allow universities to hire teaching-only staff, and create specific research positions and research institutes that give opportunity for long-term, creative and multidisciplinary scholarship. As at the Australian National University (ANU), research schools, staff could be short-term (1 year sabbaticals) or medium-term (5 years for a significant project) with a core of permanent staff. As roles became more negotiable, universities would have enormous flexibility for staff to contract in or out of teaching or research, within or between universities. This would be a future to look forward to with real opportunities for scholars and scholarship. Yet I do not expect it to happen. Partly for sheer want of imagination and partly out of justifiable fear of how such a system might be abused by

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administrators as a cost-cutting exercise, scholars themselves will not want to be seen as 'tall poppies'.

Unfortunately, the surviving scholarly and Asian Studies disciplines are mostly located in faculties of Arts that are financially weakest and most vulnerable to decimation. Last year's redundancies in the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Arts (notwithstanding that enrolments were increasing under the new Melbourne model) were devastating to Asian Studies. The Research Schools at ANU, long insulated from some of these hostile trends, are also looking vulnerable to being folded back into the standard teaching and research pattern. I fear that not much faith can be placed in the goodwill of university administrations. Asian scholars need to think very hard whether they are prepared to organise more effectively as a group or by default trust to the basic survival strategy of *sauve qui peut*. I am not optimistic.

There may be a rather sad analogy with global warming. Scholars are like polar bears watching the ice melt around them. With climate change, polar bears will eventually either be dead or in a zoo. Scholars will probably survive by their wits in the academic zoo but scholarship may become an indulgence for those in retirement with the luxury of an assured income.

Universities have become sad places indeed if they cannot encourage scholarship and must drive their academic staff with whips and clubs to pursue their chosen vocation. Collegiality has not died out altogether but it has become enfeebled. Unless scholars can find common cause with each other and fight back against the managerial steamroller, the university environment will continue to deteriorate. Factory life it will be.