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Renewable Teaching and Learning: Untangling the role of the Australian university

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This paper engages with current debate on the role of the university following COVID-19, exposing the ongoing corruption of traditional values of the tertiary sector, and the shift in teaching and learning expectations across the academy. It highlights the negative impact of the huge decline in government funding since the 1990s, salary inequity, ongoing job loss and decline in teaching and learning conditions within universities, alongside proven wage theft and exploitation of sessional and casual staff. Government neglect of the higher education sector is obvious in its refusal to support any university staff through JobKeeper funding. These issues, together with an ongoing public apathy towards the education sector, have demoralised, disenfranchised and fragmented this vital knowledge-rich professional cohort. The critique argues that government funding to the tertiary sector must be increased to positively incentivise and restore the role of the public university in a democratic society. There should be a clear recalibration of higher education within the public sector. Staff need to work together across disciplines and hierarchies to address proven dysfunctional practices within the academy with a strong, united voice. It advances some recommendations to recapture the spirit of the once idealistic university mission, while also addressing the many-stranded, utilitarian functions that are demanded in a complex, changing landscape.

Keywords: Government funding, managerialism, job loss, course cuts, staff morale, wage inequity, wage theft, research subsidisation

Introduction

Many commentators have stressed that there is a crisis within the tertiary education system. And there is. It crosses most sectors of the university, impacting its core functions that are to provide a platform for quality teaching and excellence in innovative research. Both these arms are considered to be essential for the 'greater good' of the society that supports them. One 16th century definition based on Oxford University describes itself as a 'community of teachers and scholars', the word scholars including the students (French, quoted in Fisher, 2018). This has a distinct utopian resonance. The university traditionally had a mandate to engage with the broader community for the common good

of society. Historically in the western world, there was an acceptance of the university functioning as an active public sphere, promoting community engagement and encouraging democratic citizenship. Certainly, the university of the 21st century is a more complex beast, but it is useful to outline this foundational mission. It supplies a simpler vision of the role of the university.

This critique engages with current debate on the role of the university following COVID-19, exposing the ongoing corruption of traditional values of the tertiary sector and the shift in expectations across the academy. It demonstrates the fragmentation and demoralisation caused by ongoing funding cuts and micromanagement that undermines the fundamental conditions required to keep a university

functioning at a professional, sustainable level. Kenny (2018, pp. 365-6) argues that 'neo-liberal economic policies have led to significant reductions in government funding, increased managerialism and external accountability mechanisms' that have disempowered academics and 'reduced productivity because they ignore the nature of academic work.' A productive move, garnered from detailed research, is for academics to have 'strong influence over the way their work is controlled and managed, to ensure the nature of their work is adequately considered' (Kenny, 2018, 378). This is one initiative that would help address the disempowerment across academia with a resultant shift into survival mode. Inclusion in decision making and recognition of the 'self-managed aspects of academic work' (Kenny, 2018, 365) is also recommended, alongside a renewed respect for the entrenched professional academic ethos that drives the higher education sector.

Universities are 'national assets' according to the University of Sydney Association of Professors (University of Sydney, 2018) and there is a dignity attached to that description. However, in current government funding and policy agendas the university exists as a knowledge-making, brain-power supply unit within society, justified in terms of its economic benefit

and its usefulness to industry. Certainly, it can be viewed as a 'brains trust' resource that becomes increasingly valuable in a knowledge economy. As Baird (2018) observed, Australian 'education exports were \$31.9 billion, having increased 14 per cent' over the previous year. She continued that the figures show that Australian brains 'are almost equivalent to minerals and coal as Australia's top earning sectors.' Such cross-sector analysis is both useful and detrimental to debates concerning the role of the university now and into the future. Of course, the Covid crisis had a crippling effect; nevertheless, this is still the accepted discourse for justifying tertiary education as an industry.

Given this framework, the question too easily becomes whether universities as a national resource should be treated and managed like any other corporate institution. This argument is raging despite 36 of 39 Australian universities being situated in the public sector. The university is not profit-driven since any surplus is invested back into the institution, it pays no tax and there are no shareholders (Garton, 2018; Sainsbury, 2020). Nevertheless, the relentless managerial push to profit maximisation has shifted the culture and work practice of higher educational institutions (Aspromourgos, 2018; Baird, 2018; Connell, 2016; Garton, 2018; Shergold,

2018). There is a public acceptance of this corporatisation that affects government funding, policy initiatives, implementation strategies and accountability chains. The effect of government legislation and policy is shackling the sector into a dysfunctional, micromanaged corporate shell (Aspromourgos, 2018; Garton, 2018; Kenny, 2018, pp. 365-67). The University of Sydney alone is governed by 120 separate pieces of federal and state legislation all of which involve compliance reports and costings (Garton, 2018). Obviously, this is an important element driving the rampant managerialism and administrative governance of university policy, assets, staff, research, and also students, the clients/consumers of the marketing machine.

In addition, from its early incarnation, the university sector functioned as an alternative public sphere. Our universities were accepted channels of innovative criticism of government

Unfortunately, there is also a long history in Australia of oppressive action against the independence and freedom of speech enabled by university institutions. Also unfortunately, both federal and state governments have a history of not being sympathetic to, or recognising the value of, this alternative public sphere.

policy, private enterprise, public discourse and civic purpose, an alternative think tank to mainstream social, cultural and political systems. The University of Sydney Act (New South Wales Government, 1989; 2017), in Sections 6(1) and 6(2): (b), places the mission of the university as 'the promotion, within the limits of the University's resources, of

scholarship, research, free inquiry, the interaction of research and teaching, and academic excellence.' Importantly, it also adds the need for 'participation in public discourse', while the University Charter (University of Sydney, 2019, 2(4.b), p. 2) goes further to encourage 'principled and informed discussion of all aspects of knowledge and culture'. This is a laudable mission for a publicly funded educational institution, one that academics at all levels have been proud to promote.

Unfortunately, there is also a long history in Australia of oppressive action against the independence and freedom of speech enabled by university institutions. Also unfortunately, both federal and state governments have a history of not being sympathetic to, or recognising the value of, this alternative public sphere. For anyone passionate about this educational sector, it seems a dangerous folly to categorise and encourage universities to situate themselves as competing firms driven by profit-maximising policies with directors and managers implementing a corporate mentality. It is essential to recalibrate this sector firmly within the public sector adhering to the more traditional, Australian mandate of the university mission. As a public sector, it is primarily the government's responsibility to adequately fund the education of its people, so it is essential to reassess the level of direct funding that

Australian citizens expect their government to provide for a quality tertiary education system.

Government funding and incongruities

Since the 1990s, there has been a systematic withdrawal of funding to tertiary education. The *Education and Training: Budget Review 2019-20* states that 'Total funding for all Australian education sits at around 1.8 per cent of GDP'. The Eurostat report on 'Educational expenditure statistics' (2020) highlighted that 'In 2017, public spending on education relative to GDP was highest in Denmark (7.3 per cent) and Sweden (7.1 per cent) while it was lowest in Romania (2.7 per cent)'. However, 'most of the Member States reported ratios of public expenditure on education relative to GDP that were between 3.4 per cent and 5.8 per cent, with only Romania below this range' (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2020). The average was 4.7 per cent of GDP with the United Kingdom sitting at 4.8 per cent in 2018 (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2020). Again, I reiterate that Australian education expenditure is an embarrassingly poor 1.8 per cent of GDP lagging behind Romania, one of the poorest European countries that contributes 2.7 per cent of GDP. At the same time, government policy here is to allocate ongoing tertiary funding to universities according to their performance measured against a global comparative scale of excellence. Australia is already under-achieving.

The key stakeholders in this teaching and research equation are academics: lecturers, researchers, tutors and technicians (whether long term sessionals or casual staff) and students (both local and international). There is also a large sector of support workers – 57 per cent of all university staff (Klikauer & Link 2020, p.70) – including librarians, IT staff, catering, cleaning, gardening and maintenance staff etc., who play an essential functional role. Naturally a large institution needs governance, and this belongs in the offices of the chancellor, vice chancellor, the senate, executive deans and directors, with deans of faculties and various academic and administrative units sitting below the main managerial hierarchy. The number and purpose of these managerial towers has multiplied according to the imperatives imposed by government legislation, academic teaching and research priorities. The other bulging hubs here are the national and international marketing departments. Organisational charts, including the University of Sydney organisational structure outlined here, detail the structural elements of managerial and marketing roles with tiers of command within Australian universities which clearly demonstrate the complexification of contemporary university governance.

One staggering by-product of managerialism is the exorbitant wages paid to university vice chancellors with most salaries sitting between \$1 – \$1.6 million according to Smith

and Guthrie (2020). Australia's Prime Minister receives just under \$550,000. There is still the perception that Australia needs to pay higher salaries to attract the best talent with a parallel argument that the role requires a highly prestigious figurehead. However, there is no rational explanation for this extraordinary example of cultural cringe. Australia became its own nation 120 years ago. It is argued that the Australian salary compares with an average pay rate for Vice Chancellors of A\$670,000 in the US and A\$635,000 in the UK (Smith & Guthrie, 2020). The Australian Association of University Professors recommends that a fair wage would be double a professorial salary, which would equate to \$360,000 a year (Baker, 2020).

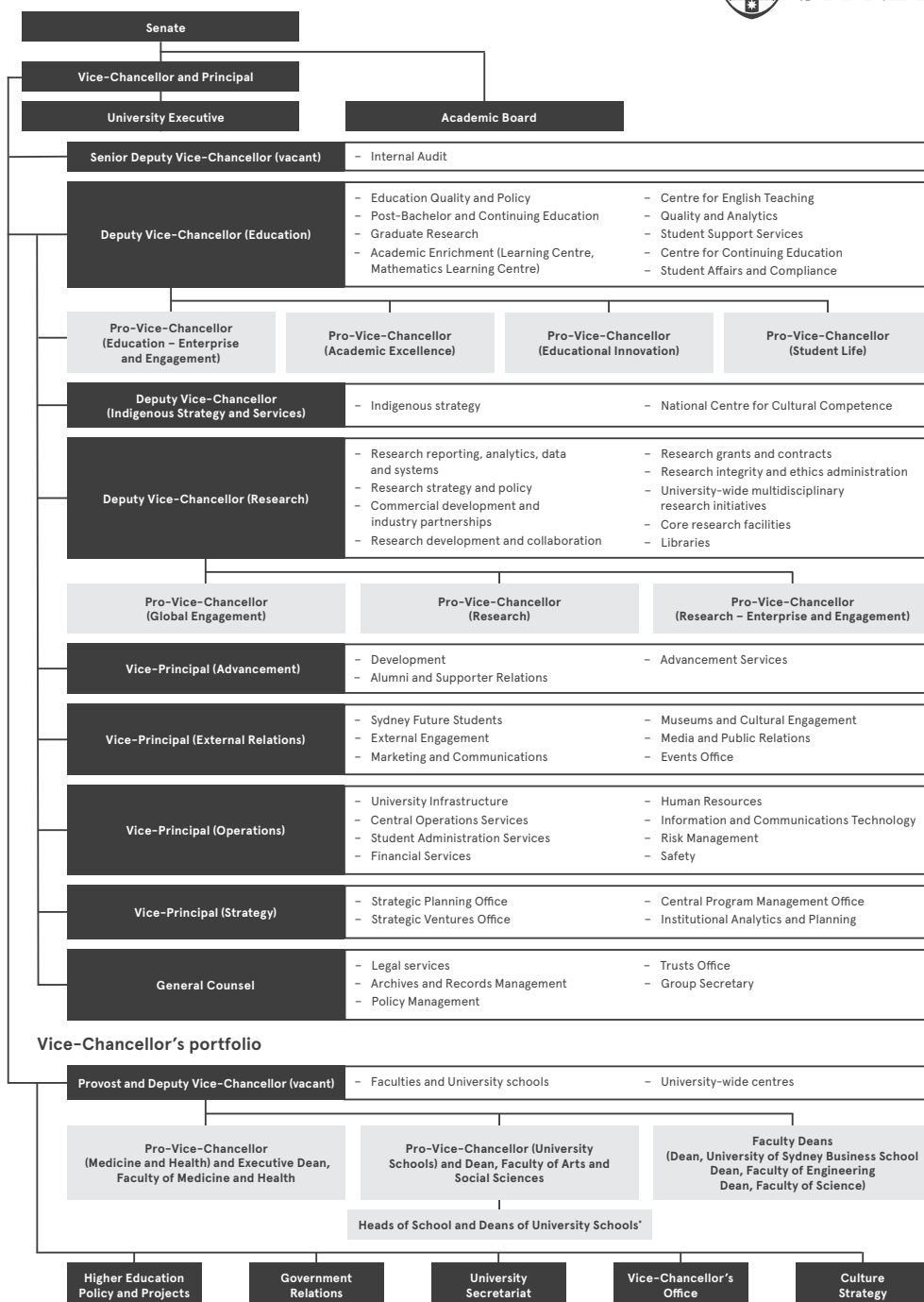
Equally extravagant pay scales apply to all higher levels of university executive management in Australia. These high salaries are permitted even under the adverse economic climate of severe funding cuts to the education sector. Under the same regime, the universities cannot afford additional permanent staff, or continuing positions for part-permanent contract and sessional teaching staff. There have been huge job losses, whole departments closed and widespread course cancellations. The most vulnerable staff, sessional and casual academics, are victims of wage theft allegations against universities for underpayment, an issue that will be discussed in detail. Many critics argue that academic staff are being micromanaged by highly paid managers and bureaucrats that the university does not need, but somehow can afford to pay. This is not an isolated syndrome. 'In the UK, two thirds of universities now have more administrators than they do faculty staff' (Spicer, 2017). Critical cost savings can be made across the bureaucratic and administrative sections of the university hierarchy, starting with cutting salaries to vice-chancellors, directors and executive deans. This whole salary framework needs to be reappraised. Realistically many of these higher management positions should be abolished.

Funding cuts and survival

Putting the managerial sector of universities aside for the present, the next section of this argument focuses on the erosion of confidence and stability within the teaching sector which traditionally forms half the professional responsibility of Australian universities. Ongoing cuts to government funding of the tertiary sector since the 1990s have shifted the educational and research priorities, as well as the cultural ethos, of Australian universities (Brett 2021; Kenny, 2018; Klikauer & Link, 2020), although I am not addressing the research sector here. Again Garton (2018) provides this example:

In 1990, 89 per cent of the funding for the University of Sydney came from the Government – excluding HECs and

The University of Sydney organisational structure



*These roles include the following: Head and School and Dean, University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning; Head of School and Dean, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and Head of School and Dean, the University of Sydney Law School.

As at January 2021

Fig. 1: University of Sydney organisational structure for top tier levels (University of Sydney 2021).

Also see University of Queensland organisational structure: <https://about.uq.edu.au/files/5643/org-chart.pdf> and Australian National University structure: <https://www.anu.edu.au/files/resource/OVC210009%20SeniorManOrgChart%20v2.pdf>

FEE-Help. In 2017, such Government funding was merely 30 per cent. And much of this had to be won in competition with other universities. In a \$2b annual business only \$30m of the University of Sydney's funding came from government with absolutely no strings attached.

Admittedly, the University of Sydney is a resource rich, sandstone university, but a similar down-scaling of funding can be applied across all Australian universities.

The 2015 federal budget alone cut funding to the Office for Learning and Teaching by over 36 per cent (\$A16.1m) for the period 2016 to 2019 (Gardner, 2015). This was only one stroke of the pen. As Gittens (2018) argues, 'For 30 years, successive federal governments have worked to get university funding off the federal budget'. Traditionally – and officially this is still operative – the university sector is situated within the public sector and government funding is an imperative. The corporatisation of universities is directly the result, and probably purposefully the result, of this direct funding policy shift since funding and stable functioning are no longer guaranteed by government.

Under these circumstances, the general management response to funding reductions was ongoing restructures and staff cuts. Multiple management theorists argue consistently that the uncertainty created by regular restructuring generates an insecure, demoralised and often resistant staff workplace (Ashford, Lee & Bobko, 1989; Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008; Hechanov & Cementina-Olpoc, 2013; Samson, Donnett & Daft, 2021). Mason (as cited in Crysthanos, 2020; Kenny, 2018) confirms staff 'burnout' because of job cutting and increased workloads. The equal and opposite reaction of the universities, as proactive, intelligent institutions, was to seek other sources of income – avenues of revenue which were diligently pursued. Hence the recruitment drive across the international student market which led to the over reliance that rebounded so virulently during the COVID crisis and will have long lasting repercussions. Before COVID, international students made up 26 per cent of the Australian student cohort, with over 50 per cent of students in business schools (Baird, 2018). Pursuing other income streams also resulted in a closer coupling with corporate investment that often came with a self-serving agenda that could not easily be foreseen or vetoed.

At the same time as the government slashed direct funding, there was increased regulation through the federal Department of Education and Training. Despite government assurances that they would 'reduce the reporting and regulatory burden' in universities (Australian Government, 2013), this has not eventuated (Garton, 2018). Increasingly, accountability was measured in restrictive economic justifications and productivity tables and graphs measuring value. This further disenfranchised specific disciplines such as the humanities, arts and social sciences where learning outcomes are not as

easily translatable to an Excel spreadsheet (Brett 2021, p26-27). The decline in Australian literature offerings is only one example of this trend (Lamond, 2019; Lever, 2019). The vital emphasis in these disciplines is not on factual learning as much as on the development of critical thinking, analytical and communication skills, creativity, innovation and problem solving. Sadly, it is essential to reassert that critical thinking is recognised as a vital foundation of democratic citizenship. It is also an integral factor in the successful completion of any university study.

Nevertheless, these departments are now fighting for breath, further challenged to prove their worth through job-ready matrices of productivity. It is not only seen in the closure of creative departments such as the School of Photography at Griffith University, theatre and drama programs at La Trobe and Newcastle universities, drama and musicology at Monash. The University of Sydney is cutting staff in the pathology and physiology disciplines by 39 per cent, with the loss of 29 full time positions in physiology alone (Crysthanos, 2020). ANU announced a loss of 20 positions from Health and Medicine as well as the closure of the neuroscience research unit (Evans & Glenday, 2021) – the neuroscience unit being a decision so unpopular that it was rescinded. If the departments and learning disciplines are 'the engine of university discovery and learning', as agreed at the University of Sydney Association of Professors Symposium (University of Sydney, 2018), the closure of these schools and subsequent absence of professional expertise from our education system is a critical blow for future students. However, few people recognise or discuss the ongoing consequences of the damage caused by such closures and loss of staff, or the flow on effect in learning outcomes for future students.

There is another funding imbalance that must be recognised if Australian universities are to compete successfully in the global tertiary sector. The *Budget Review 2019-20 on Education and Training* shows that private schools in Australia receive more government funding than the entire higher education sector (Ferguson & Harrington, 2020). It is an obvious indicator of the lack of regard for tertiary education. Budget projections moving towards 2023 show that this level of funding will increase for the secondary private school sector and continue to decrease for the higher education sector (Ferguson & Harrington, 2020).

The other inequity here is that private schools receive considerably more funding than government public schools that serve the majority of Australian families. This is a staggering inequity. Since the vast majority of Australian children attend public schools, the figures demonstrate that these children are immediately disadvantaged by their government from their first day of school. Despite numerous reviews and inquiries, it is astonishing that this privileging of the private sector continues. Parents and teachers should be

demanding a radical shift in government priorities to ensure educational equity for all students. However, while it is important to acknowledge these facts here, it is not the focus of this critique.

COVID, job loss and declining student experience

COVID was the blowtorch that no one could predict, and its impact on our universities was devastating with over 17,300 job losses in the first year of the pandemic. Deakin University alone shed over 300 jobs (Carey, 2020). Now it is estimated that over 40,000 jobs have been lost (McGregor, 2021). The recent cynical disregard by the Australian Government of the university sector exposes its distrust of, and attempts to repurpose, the established educational sector. This is evidenced by its lack of any financial support during the COVID crisis and the exclusion of university staff at all levels – academic, library, maintenance or catering staff – from JobKeeper.

Such a targeted omission raises serious questions about government commitment to the future welfare and functional integrity of this long accepted educational domain. As Moodie (2020) argued, 'Excluding universities from JobKeeper is another way of keeping universities in their place'. Unfortunately, many more women than men lost jobs during the crisis and were further oppressed by this exclusion from JobKeeper (Woods, Griffith & Crowley, 2021). The current state of affairs means that staff are fighting for survival and correct pay rates in an insecure workplace. Instead, they should be fighting for professional respect, challenging damaging university policies and inequalities, forming cooperative alliances to address key issues with an empowered, united voice, as well as actively engaging in community debate.

There is a significant decrease in university course offerings across all campuses. Sadly, future students and their parents will not realise what they are missing and how it will detract from their professional education. There is a decline in direct teaching and learning time scales: 13-week courses are now 12 weeks (Brett, 2021) which is already operational at Griffith University and proposed by University of Sydney (Ollivain, 2021, April). Some universities are offering 10-week courses in postgraduate offerings with two weeks of non-teaching time, supposedly to allow students time to focus on assignments. Apart from less rigorous course content, this means that sessional staff are only paid for the ten weeks teaching time rather than a 12 or 13-week contract, a further saving to university budgets.

The other cumulative and blatant outcome of this strategy is that it detracts from the student learning experience; students are robbed of weeks of teaching expertise and relevant learning material. The financial cost to the student is the same or now, with a new cost equation, it could be less, or it could be doubled. Learning is culled along with the number of courses and the shorter time frames. There is less time for students to engage with the key concepts and principles of each course, less time for long-term learning, for critiquing content, for learning to write incisive arguments in assessment responses. And students, many of whom work full time or have several part-time jobs, are already time poor. The focus becomes the assignment topics rather than the whole course content, the student is assessment focused rather than learning focused. This again detracts from what should be the teaching and learning responsibility of the university as an educational institution. Mason (quoted in Crythanos, 2020) laments that

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in her faculty, 'We won't have enough staff to give students a good experience and that's a tragedy'.

In a purely logistic sense, the overall standard of course learning is decreased, as is the knowledge imparted to students. This necessarily equates with a lowering of skills and knowledge expertise in course graduates. The parallel argument that has circulated for the last ten to twenty years on the lowering standards of student graduates because of lower entry level requirements, the lowering of academic standards and pass expectations, only adds to the negative equation of what is already proven here. As Brett (2021) argues in an incisive article in *The Monthly*, what we are offering is not world-class. A comparative analysis of staff numbers in specific disciplines here and in major overseas campuses clearly demonstrates this (Brett, 2021). Brett (2021) states that 'Many more people can now benefit from university education, but Australia no longer provides the intensive university education it once did.' Parents and students need to become more informed and look further than university rankings in considering educational options.

The complacency of the Australian public that allows this continuing erosion of teaching, learning, and student experience is unsettling. It should be a major concern, especially to the families of students who will be attending these teaching institutions over the next twenty years. The slow dumbing down of the university teaching and learning sector cannot be justified or easily rectified. It is not the fault of teaching staff who must be highly committed professionals to continue working in this increasingly toxic sector. Rather it is the result of cynical government funding cuts and policy demands implemented by bureaucrats and managers who

have no direct contact with students (Connell, 2016; Gittens, 2018). Indeed, the creeping funding and job cut syndrome is crippling a system that took generations of work by dedicated echelons of academic staff to build. It is also crippling to students left with high debt at the beginning of their working and family lives.

The general and insistent argument is made that technology fills in all these gaps and adds many additional benefits for student learning. The information richness and digital innovation that can deliver well-structured, focused course content is praised as raising teaching standards and learning outcomes. It is also argued that it equalises opportunity across the student cohort (Black, Bissessar & Boolaky, 2019) because of the repeated refrain that the online environment is a level playing field – which, in reality, is still debatable. Having taught in many online courses since the late 1990s and more intensively over the last eight years, I have no argument with the amazing teaching and learning opportunities that online platforms can provide to students. The growing expertise and incentivised teaching initiatives do provide a wide range of possibilities for individual and collaborative learning outcomes. Online teaching does provide opportunities for flexible learning, empowering a wide range of students to engage successfully at tertiary level.

However, it can be difficult to inspire a student to push beyond their own perceived limits or pick up and motivate a stressed or dejected student, in an online environment. There are many experienced online lecturers and tutors who devote the additional time needed and manage this task successfully. But again, there is usually not enough time allocated for individual attention. For sessional staff especially, this is extra time and effort that is not paid. In terms of face-to-face student contact, one enthusiastic colleague posted when returning to on-campus classes:

I've started giving classes again to real, live, in the flesh human beings, after a year. THANK F**K! Online is fine. Yeah, I get how the buttons work. But hey, good to feel your energy humans.

The motivational energy of inspirational lecturers and tutors instilling a passion for understanding and knowledge is rarely recognised in futuristic discussions of learning pathways which are solidly embedded in digital solutions. There will always be a demand for more enticing areas for peer-to-peer learning and social gathering. This used to happen in the libraries and campus refectories, but we are moving into a future with different demands.

It is essential to have quality digital learning available to students 24/7. There are already dedicated specialists working across the university disciplines to enable and improve these services. All university strategies for the future incorporate this vision across multiple indices of teaching and learning

value. However, there needs to be a balance here too. Do we really need infrastructure investment in experiential spaces capable of creating 'Instagram-worthy moments for students', as a recent technological report by Optus and Cisco on future university planning endorse? (2021, p. 21). Do we really need a shopping mall at The University of Queensland to replace the existing Student Union complex? These are not visionary learning strategies.

The framework here encourages the current individualist, narcissist mentality of mindless 'me' moments rather than peer-to-peer learning and debate. The Optus and Cisco report (2021, p. 12) continues that students want university interaction to be 'friction free' with systems and applications that are 'intuitive [with] services delivered to them when they need them, and mostly via [a] mobile device'. It appears that many digital strategies, which are being considered by management as serious solutions, can be dismissed as either short term fixes or 'clouded' thinking.

There is no doubt that future students must be educated to be change ready, innovative, resourceful and industrious to meet the challenges of a shifting and uncertain local and global landscape. Yet nothing is being done to address some of the central issues impacting undergraduate teaching, that is, ongoing staff cuts, over-worked, demoralised full-time staff and underpaid, exploited sessional and casual staff. This framework obviously exposes diminished teaching and learning outcomes with a reduction in courses, content and reduced teaching hours. As Aspromourgos (2018) insisted, 'our [academics'] working conditions are our students' learning conditions too'. Despite the Government recently announcing an investment package of nearly \$3 billion for university research (Australian Government, 2020 October 6; 2020 December 14) as part of the Research Training and Research Block Grants programs, there is complete silence on continuing to maintain and, more importantly, improve the quality of university teaching and teaching conditions.

Teaching, research and wage theft

Here again is another dilemma. It is little known outside the academy that money is diverted from teaching revenue to support university research. In 2013-14 the federal budget supported just over one-third of university research (Australian Government, 2017, p. 11), 70 per cent of which went to the top eight universities (Gardner, 2015). The wide gap is sourced in other ways through state governments, business and investment income. The *Productivity Review: University Education* (Australian Government, 2017, p. 44) clearly stated that the majority of additional funding:

came from teaching revenues paid by domestic and international students for their education In particular, universi-

ties use the portion of teaching revenues that is in excess of the actual cost to educate the student (the 'teaching surplus') to cross-subsidise their research functions.

In fact, the review highlighted that teaching 'plays second fiddle to research, with consequences for student satisfaction, teaching quality, and graduate outcomes' (Australian Government, 2017, p. 2).

By diverting these funds directly sourced from university teaching programs and teaching departments, the universities are systematically short-changing Australian students. The *Productivity Review* (Australian Government, 2017, p. 46) admits that these cross-subsidies could result in 'ultimately affecting Australian productivity and economic growth.' Fifty years ago, teaching was the primary focus of tertiary education. There are many reasons for this shift in priorities, but there clearly needs to be corrective action taken to address this growing imbalance.

Despite media reports that highlight university dependence on international students – and this is a relevant argument – it is also true that 'Commonwealth-supported domestic students generate the greatest value in teaching surpluses' (Australian Government, 2017, p. 45). This particularly applies to the commerce, arts and law disciplines which have 'substantial teaching surpluses as they are relatively low-cost disciplines to deliver with significant economies of scale' (Australian Government, 2017, p. 45). Perhaps this is behind the government legislation to double student fees in the arts and law disciplines – more cash in the bank.

It does not explain, though, the closure of departments and high staff loss in many humanities departments across Australia. There are contradictions here, since there seems to be no justification for the ongoing demolition of arts faculties. Is it simply that the Government perceives these disciplines to be the generators of left-wing, divergent rather than compliant thinking? Surely this is a puerile, implausible argument. The only other possible explanations are short-sighted (and plainly wrong): that education focused on the ability to think clearly and analytically is valueless in terms of social well-being or advancement; or that it does nothing tangible to benefit the Australian GDP.

A report from the Grattan Institute claims that 'universities earn up to \$3.2 billion more from students than they spend on teaching' (Norton, 2015, p. 1). Over half this income is generated from domestic students (Norton, 2015, p. 18). Gittens (2018) argues that it is unreasonable 'to require students, rather than taxpayers, to contribute to the cost of university research.' This information needs to be publicised

to parents who pay taxes to support a national education system. It amounts to an abuse of the system and there should be a national protest.

Another ethical issue where the universities should be held accountable is the exploitation of sessional and casual staff (Maslen, 2020; Cahill, 2020; Duffy, 5 August 2020; Duffy, 18 August 2020; Palmer & Cantrell, 2019; Brett, 2021). Public exposure of exploitative practices highlighted that 'wage theft and casual work are built into university business models' (Cahill, 2020). The University of Melbourne is Australia's richest university with a reserve fund of AU\$4.43 billion but has 72.9 per cent of its staff in insecure employment on contract, sessional or casual wages (Duffy, 5 August 2020; Maslen, 2020). It is ironic that professional part-time lecturers and tutors, who are responsible for up to 70 per cent of teaching at Australian universities (Duffy, July 2020;

Palmer & Cantrell, 2019), are the most vulnerable staff. It is an exploited workforce, underpaid and invisible within the university system, one that does not rank on anyone's Excel spreadsheet or comparison charts.

At least ten Australian universities have faced serious wage theft allegations over the last 18 months which led to a Senate Inquiry. RMIT, as one example, was taken to the Fair Work Commission by the National Tertiary Education Union for systemic underpayment of staff. The crisis is evidenced by the payout to 1,500 casual staff from the University of Melbourne for underpayment for marking following action by the National Tertiary Education Union (Smith, 2021). Smith (2021) highlighted that staff in the Arts faculty alone were back-paid an estimated \$6 million for work dating back to 2014. The University of New South Wales is budgeting for a potential \$36 million due in back-payments to casual staff (Ollivain, 3 June 2021). Early last year, Griffith University contacted me to explain that the wage theft allegations were alarming, and it was investigating this issue with relevance to its own practice. A week later, I was informed that I was not affected by any discrepancy and need not be concerned. How did I know what the investigation process was? Did anyone at my university receive back payment? There is no way of knowing.

In fact, the invisibility and disrespect of contract sessional and casual staff across all disciplines, alongside chronic underpayment situations, can become a humiliating experience. Cancellation of courses, and of whole departments, can occur with no direct notification to the affected staff member/s of their job loss. Such cancellations occurred across Australia at every university in the last year. Personally, I

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have been on 13-week contracts, 52 weeks year-round, since 2009 with the same department at the same university. It was obvious that I was too old to be engaged as a full-time staff member, even though I have four degrees and received several awards. Advertisements for academic appointments from about 2014 started including the phrase 'seeking generational change' in job descriptions. Being of a more mature age, I stopped applying. Nevertheless, I consider myself fortunate to have had ongoing academic work.

More recently, I went to set up the website for a course I had taught for many years, when I realised that the course was no longer being offered. I rang several colleagues, including the Deputy Dean, who seemed unaware of the course cut, so I contacted the Dean of the faculty. In responding, the Dean referred to cost cutting and restructures – which was to be expected. However, the final words displayed the lack of respect offered to any sessional or casual staff member on a university campus today.

I regret that you have been caught unawares by this course cancellation, but such is the nature of sessional teaching-it is insecure, irregular and unempowered. Best wishes – Dean (Personal correspondence, 2021)

I totally agree that sessional staff are unempowered, but still insist that any organisation has the obligation to communicate with its staff. Open, clear, consistent communication – which is one of the basic principles of management communication – is regarded as best practice. This ghosting of staff is another unethical practice haunting the establishment.

In addition, hours allocated to tasks in casual staff contracts are unrealistic. How can anyone query payment based on a complicated formula with a contract allocating 3.76 hours per week for teaching and 5.49 hours per week for marking? The complex formulas make many staff contracts indecipherable. The time allocated for tasks such as marking are unrealistic and virtually ensure that staff will be underpaid to adequately complete the task (Smith, 2021; Palmer & Cantrell, 2019). Both staff and students are robbed in this scenario. As staff race to complete marking, the risks of incorrect allocation of grades increase, and there will be inadequate feedback. In fact, staff were instructed to 'skim read student assignments to meet impossible pay rates' at The University of Queensland (Fenton in Duffy, 18 August 2020). RMIT reduced the marking time per assignment to half the previous allocated time which sets up impossible goals for casual staff (Duffy, 2020, 18 August).

There is little time allocated for the administrative work required. The University of Sydney Casuals Network wrote in a submission to the Select Committee on Job Security that a 2020 audit 'found that casual staff did six times more administration work than they were paid for' (University of Sydney Casuals Network, 2020). It is useless to complain since

jobs are insecure and there are reports of staff being blacklisted (Zhou, 2021). Be grateful the work is there ... for now. Nearly all casual staff have no provision of office space, computers or equipment, no sick leave, no staff development or inclusion in basic collegial activities. Importantly, superannuation contributions are 9.5 per cent for casuals instead of 17.5 per cent for permanent and part permanent appointments. Casuals are cheap and easily dismissed from the system.

Achievements

The university as a public education institution should be better than this. Our history tells a story. There was a much stronger demand for higher education after WW11, with 31,753 students enrolled in 1949 compared to 14,236 in 1939. By 1979 there were approximately 300,000 students which increased to 828,871 in 2003 (Abbott & Doucouliagos, 2003). Current figures continue this growth cycle with Garton (2018) highlighting there are:

1.1 million Australians in Australian universities, 4.4 per cent of the population and there are 123,000 staff. Ten million Australians now have a post-school qualification, and 43 per cent of Australians aged 25-34 have a bachelor's degree. The value add to the economy is of the order of \$30 billion.

This is an immense achievement that should be celebrated.

The fact that 'Nearly 90 per cent of graduates are in full-time work three years after graduation' is remarkable (Universities Australia, 2017). Making university education accessible to a much broader section of the community over the last 50 years, moving away from the elitist mindset that surrounded the 'ivory tower', is a great success story. Yet the system, its ethical code and mode of practice, is now slowly being demolished. Recently, Moodie (2020, May 19) argued that this is an extension of the current 'cultural war' being played out on the political stage against organisations such as 'CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology, the ABC, the creative arts, museums and offending cultural institutions that don't support conservative ideology'. This argument cannot be dismissed lightly.

The arts, humanities and social science disciplines have been under huge financial pressure since they are not necessarily 'industry ready' disciplines and suffered more job losses than other faculties during COVID. However, these disciplines are key functioning elements as 'teaching surplus' generators (Australian Government, 2017) for the university as outlined earlier. In terms of employment and productivity, just one example shows the stupidity of dismissing the creativity, innovation and audacity of enterprise that comes from this sector. The film industry in Australia is a high stakes player as the 2019 Study on the Economic Contribution of the Motion Picture and Television Industry in Australia indicates.

In 2017-18, the Australian film industries earned \$22.50 billion, generating \$9.19 billion in Gross Value Added (GVA), while also employing 84,982 Australians in Full Time Equivalent jobs (Olsberg•SPI, 2019, p. 6). According to the consulting firm Olsberg•SPI, there was 'a gross value increase of 15 per cent compared to 2012-13' (2019, p. 6). This demonstrates what skilled professional creatives, taught and equipped by the arts, humanities and associated disciplines, are achieving, and what they contribute to the Australian economy. These are the cultural industries that entertained and comforted Australian families during the long lockdowns. It also must be remembered that any one cultural sector cannot survive in Australia on its own. There are interdependencies and multiple, complex networks of professionals across many creative disciplines that enable and keep our cultural industries functioning. Again, this success story should be celebrated.

There needs to be a reaffirmation of the somewhat utopian vision of the university as a 'community of teachers and scholars'; a more comprehensive appraisal of the role of the university moving into the future. This vision should more closely comply with the high-minded goals and ethical codes outlined in every university charter and mission statement. This is still discernible in the ongoing commitment of academics to their role as educators and researchers. Historically, there was a strong sense of community that existed on every university campus, within faculties and across disciplines.

There was also an active alternative public sphere enabled by staff engagement, lively public debate on campus, and multiple peer-to-peer learning and cultural activities at many different levels. With the retreat of many academics into siloed silence, Australian universities have lost this vibrancy as well as much of its commitment to engage with important social and ethical issues beyond campus boundaries. While some universities, departments and disciplines do successfully create an inclusive, exciting learning culture, overall, it has taken only one generation for that broad sense of a campus community to wither away. It is not unthinkable that this connection can be reclaimed.

Taking the initiative

It is the duty of a national government to supply an effective education system for the citizens of Australia. There is an urgent need to recalibrate funding policy and productivity criteria for universities, to depoliticise and stabilise the funding for this sector. This would enable a much-needed revitalisation of the core functions of quality teaching, excellence in research, and of building an inclusive, engaged, scholarly community. Of course, there needs to be accountability, but a direct funding-without-strings-attached model needs to be reactivated. It is

not an investment strategy that requires constant performance scrutiny and micromanagement of professional teaching and research staff, it is a commitment to higher education as a government responsibility.

There is a deficiency of vision and seeming incapacity by politicians to think beyond the next election timeline. This has to change. Politicians don't lead, certainly and sadly, not in Australia. Restorative change can happen from the bottom up, with a ground swell of dissent and then a vision for reframing the future. Certainly, the National Tertiary Education Union has a strong role to play here, so academics should join the union and/or get to know their union representatives. The conversation might end up surprising and encouraging both parties. The union has an expertise and knowledge of political agendas and nuances, as well as experience in dealing with university channels and political machinery, that is outside the ambit of most academics.

The university needs to have a vibrant collective voice to counter government incursions, hostile agendas or corporate intrusions. It is encouraging that one such group of staff and students, past and present, recently succeeded in challenging what appeared to be a *fait accompli* – the demolition of the Student Union complex and Schonell Theatre at The University of Queensland replacing it with an 'enterprise hub' with mall attached. As a result, there will be ongoing consultation with the Vice Chancellor's office and university management about this redevelopment recognising the history of the complex, not only providing space for the Student Union, but also keeping substantial control of the space with the student body (Duffield, 2021). This is testament to the power of grass roots action, although so many other protests across the country last year to save departments and jobs were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, academics need to talk with each other honestly, and also talk with their students.

Academics as a professional group need to forcefully reassert their presence, face-to-face with the governing arms of the university senate, executive and councils. Of course, there will be strong differences of vision and opinion across such a large and resourceful sector. However, these alliances need to be built. The long-term political and ethical potential of asserting a united response to short term, destructive government agendas and restrictive university governance could be liberating. Wouldn't it be amazing if staff were given the opportunity to 'question and even veto new administrative initiatives' as suggested by Andre Spicer (2017, 20 August)? This might seem inconceivable now, but there needs to be a vision for change. Silence is no longer an option.

The various disciplines, their departments and schools need to be re-empowered. There is ample evidence from management theorists (Kenny, 2018; McNaughton *et al.*, 2019; Samson *et al.*, 2021) that empowering staff at all levels of an organisation leads to an innovative, enlivened,

communicative culture with high motivation and increased productivity. Hopefully, this would spread more joy across the hushed department corridors. University staff working at ground level know what is needed to deliver quality teaching and learning outcomes, as well as creating innovative research initiatives, particularly in a positive collaborative workplace. There are many ways to move forward, but the first step for academics is to speak out about the current state of play that is no longer acceptable. This is difficult in an isolated, siloed academic sphere. Lateral communication across these rooms and corridors – including the multiple off-site academic staff working in isolation – needs to rebuild some of the trust and resilience that is essential to move forward.

Conclusion

Government funding must be raised to a world-worthy level. It is irrational to impose world standards across every arm of the Australian university when funding is insecure and always decreasing. Education is a government responsibility and universities are in the public sector. Government imposed accountability measures need to be reassessed. The Australian government must move away from its obstructive efforts to dominate, punish and/or privatise this important arm of knowledge expertise by restricting funding. There needs to be an acceptance of direct responsibility from federal and state territories to work cooperatively to fund tertiary education to a high standard. This would immediately address some of the rampant managerialism that is operating within the academics.

The university has a responsibility to its many publics, including the wider community – which is part of the former utopian definition. It means broadening the public sphere around university education, taking debates into the community and directly to the politicians. Stronger external engagement with key social, political, educational and economic issues by academic staff should be encouraged, not stymied by fear of government or in-house backlash.

There needs to be more discussion with parents and local communities about the quality of education and level of teaching engagement they want for their students. The community needs to be informed of the many defects in its education system that is affecting the quality and consistency of student tertiary education. It is important to recognise the truth behind Aspromourgos's 2018 argument that academics' working conditions directly impact on students' learning conditions. Empowering and sustaining the teaching arm of the university so that learning opportunities are maximised would enable students to leave campus with a high-level professional qualification and less debt. Future students still must pay for their education, no matter the standard of the specific discipline. This is easier if students are well served,

included and respected. Education is a core component of Australia's future and young people are our future.

Salary packages for Vice-Chancellors and top executives need to be rationalised to align with the public sector positioning of tertiary institutions. It is a blatant inconsistency to reward one sector of the university so highly when there are massive job losses, closure of schools, course cuts, overloaded and demoralised staff, as well as systemic wage theft within the academy. The casualisation of the university workforce must be addressed. As Cahill (2020) argues, 'Moving casual university work into salaried positions with greater security and employment rights would be good for staff, good for students and good for the broader community'. These are important steps to reinvigorate the higher education sector.

The Australian community needs to be educated and should expect more from government in setting tertiary education funding standards and policies. Government funding for education must be lifted above the current abysmal 1.81 per cent of GDP. This is a national disgrace that must be rectified in order to meet the challenges of a complex global future. The figure here undercuts any argument that Australian universities are offering a world-class education system. If more of the Australian GDP was invested directly into university teaching, the education and financial outcomes for this next generation of students would have a revitalising and compound benefit to society. As argued previously, the universities need to reinforce teaching as a grounding priority and reassert their key responsibilities to students.

This is not a utopian dream; this is an essential move into the future.

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