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It's Time: The re-form of Australian public universities¹

RICHARD HIL, ALESSANDRO PELIZZON AND FRAN BAUM

Universities matter – most of us can agree on that. They remain a vital, indispensable part of our society. What happens to them as a result of government policies, changing values and altered governance arrangements matters greatly, too. Over the past few decades, universities have changed beyond recognition. Now considered a major ‘export industry’, they operate more like private corporations than public institutions. They have embraced the principles of neoliberalism, stressing the needs of the economy above all else. The whiff of class privilege that once pervaded the fabled hallowed halls may have diminished, but it has been replaced by a corporate order based on radically different priorities and concerns.

Managers, administrators, academic staff and students now function under a commercial, transactional system of hierarchical power relations informed by ‘managerialism’ and ‘new public management’ principles. Although supposedly run more ‘efficiently’ by specialist managers – a claim we contest – universities are increasingly unhappy, troubled places in which claims of ‘excellence’ and ‘high-quality education’ mask the many problems that lurk within.

While this shift has been occurring for a few decades, the recent COVID-19 pandemic brought its implications and consequences to the fore. The traditional nature and discourse of academia had already slowly but steadily been transformed into something radically different from what it had been traditionally. The pandemic brought this to the fore and revealed a kaleidoscope of mounting catastrophes: from the 40,000 jobs estimated by the Australia Institute to have been lost in 2020 to the growing ratio of managers to students and academics, from the widespread imposition of asynchronous digital learning resources to widespread bullying and wage theft.

In this special issue of *Social Alternatives*, we highlight many of these problems, with a particular attention to those relating to institutional governance. We believe that it is here, where university governance is located – in the interstices between State legislation and Federal funding – that universities find themselves in a state of serious and enduring crisis. We do not use the word crisis

glibly. To us, it signals the current parlous condition of the modern university which, according to many observers, is in terminal decline.

The crisis of which we all speak in this special issue is not simply about fiscal mismanagement and over-regulation – of which there are many examples to ponder. Rather, we worry about the modern university principally because it reflects a range of instrumental values that have impacted every aspect of institutional life negatively: from curriculum development, pedagogical matters and research priorities to organisational decision-making and academic health and wellbeing.

The emphasis on commercial-industrial imperatives has dimmed the spark of universities, turning education into a commodified enterprise and campuses into drab, functional places devoid of any meaningful sense of community. Our main concern, however, is that if universities do not change course, and quickly, they will ultimately be emptied of soul and social purpose. Their role as bulwarks against tyranny and corruption, and seekers of truth, will simply melt away. This would be disastrous for democracy itself – and that’s why the task of transformation is so urgent.

What we show in this special issue is that the current crisis universities find themselves in demands that we seek more inclusive, healthy and effective ways of managing them. In short, universities do not have to undergo a living death. They can and must contribute to the health and wellbeing of society, ensuring (yes) that students are prepared for jobs, but also with a critical awareness of the changing world around them. This means enabling staff and students to actively and meaningfully participate in the processes and practices of governance, learning to act cooperatively, and making collective decisions for the benefit and wellbeing of all parties.

The fact is there are many alternatives to the neoliberal university. Numerous other countries celebrate fee-free higher education and governance arrangements that are open, democratic and accountable. As we demonstrate

in this issue, the policy and governance of the Australian neoliberal university are out of kilter, both internationally *and* (at least historically) domestically. Higher education institutions across Europe, in South and North America, and in many other parts of the world offer fascinating examples of the possibilities of a different kind of university – one that promotes a more rounded, citizen-oriented and critical education focused on the common good rather than fragmented private interests. Such universities are governed collectively by *all* those who make up such institutions. What these international examples remind us is that universities do not have to be run like top-down, private corporations.

It is in this regard that we have sought to prefigure alternative governance arrangements for universities by explicitly engaging in a process of collaborative authorship in the production of this special issue. As a collegial group of seasoned academics from various sandstone, redbrick and regional universities, we have sought agreement on the focus of this issue, and extensively commented on each other's contributions. As the various articles can attest, each of the authors in this special issue is profoundly and uncompromisingly passionate about the idea of the university as a *public* institution dedicated to the common good. We all believe that policy making and governance should not be the preserve of governments or the 'manageriat'. For us, being an academic is more than a job: it is a calling, a vocation. Along with students, general staff and the wider community, we all insist on active and equal participation in university governance.

We acknowledge the important contributions made by many scholars in the field of 'critical university studies'. Building upon the existing scholarship, the articles in this special issue seek to lay the foundations for a public conversation about the need for reform in Australian universities. Lake et al. remind us of the historical evolution of Australian universities, while contributions by Pelizzon et al. pinpoint the emergent context and current problems associated with university governance. Guthrie and Lucas alert us to the often-distorted financial narratives used to justify the changes we observe, while articles by Vodeb et al. and Tregear et al. discuss the lived realities of day-to-day academic life. Baum et al. highlight the health impacts, both individual and collective, that the new standards of academic life have on academics, students, and society at large. Finally, in alerting us to other possibilities, Hil et al. discuss the many alternative models of higher education that exist globally, and which offer the prospect of a regenerative university capable of responding to the challenges of the twenty-first century. A personal commentary by Honorary Professor Margaret Sims and a moving interview with Professor Emerita Raewyn Connell conclude the issue. As highly respected academics who have long actively

supported the democratisation of the modern university, both Professors Connell and Sims reflect on what this struggle has meant personally and professionally and why it is important that universities change course, especially in relation to how they are governed.

As we confront the many national and global crises before us, the task of transforming the current 'neoliberal' university has never been more pressing. But, as academics committed to foundational change, we are seeking to 're-form' and not simply 'reform' universities. What is required now is a serious public conversation about the values and principles that can help guide universities toward a better state of being by making them more democratic and relevant to the problems of the current era. To continue with business as usual is to consign Australian universities to historical irrelevance.

Authors

Richard Hil is Adjunct Professor in the School of Health Sciences and Social Work at Griffith University, Gold Coast; and Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Business, Law and Arts, Southern Cross University.

Alessandro Pelizzon is a senior lecturer in Law and Justice at Southern Cross University.

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With special mention of all the authors of this issue: Fran Baum, Raewyn Connell, Maureen Dollard, Matthew Fisher, Toby Freeman, James Guthrie, Renaud Joannes-Boyau, Stephen Lake, Adam Lucas, Kristen Lyons, Adrian McCallum, Lareen Newman, David Noble, Justin O'Connor, John Orr, Gerd Schröder-Turk, Margaret Sims, Fern Thompsett, Peter Tregear, Oliver Vodeb.

Notes:

1. This special issue is the result of ongoing cooperation and discussions among the members of Academics for Public Universities (<https://publicuniversities.org>).

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Several of the articles in this themed issue were written jointly by several authors. Short biographies are provided at the end of each article but as there are several authors for some articles and several of the authors are involved in more than one article, we include a fuller biography for each author below. The authors are members of Academics for Public Universities (<https://publicuniversities.org>), a group of academics interested in undertaking independent research to understand, address, and improve the current state of Australian public universities. The group is comprised of academics from a wide range of Australian universities and diverse disciplines, as well as Emeriti Professors and retired researchers.

Fran Baum AO is Professor of Health Equity at the Stretton Institute, University of Adelaide. She is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences and of the Australian Health Promotion Association. She is a past National President and Life Member of the Public Health Association of Australia. She is also co-Chair of the Global Steering Council of the People's Health Movement – a global network of health activists (www.phmovement.org).

Raewyn Connell is Professor Emerita at the University of Sydney. Since the early 1970s, Professor Connell has held academic positions at seven universities, in four countries. She has made landmark contributions in sociology, education and other areas, the best-known being her work on patriarchal hegemony and on Southern theory. Her writing has been translated into twenty-four languages. She served twice on a university council, has been on a lot of committees, and is a long-time and honoured member of the NTEU. Recently, Raewyn has been made the recipient of the International Sociological Association's Award for Excellence in Research and Practice.

Maureen F. Dollard is an Australian Research Council Laureate Fellow, Director of the PSC Global Observatory at the University of South Australia, Honorary Professor, University of Nottingham and recipient of the 2020 ARC Kathleen Fitzpatrick Award. Her research concerns workplace psychosocial factors and worker mental health and she has published many papers and edited books on the topic. She is the founder of the Australian Workplace Barometer, the StressCafé (stresscafe.com.au) and Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) theory.

Matthew Fisher is a Senior Research Fellow in Public Health at Flinders University. His research focuses on the intersection between public policy and social determinants of health and health equity in Australia. He has also collaborated on research on transnational corporations as commercial determinants of health. He has a particular interest in social determinants of chronic stress and mental illness, and what they mean for public policy to promote human wellbeing.

Toby Freeman worked at Flinders University from 2002-2021. He has a Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) and a PhD. His expertise is on collaborative research on health equity. He worked as a Research Fellow at the Southgate Institute for Health, Society, and Equity from 2009-2021, serving as Deputy Director from 2015-2021. Dr. Freeman led a global health equity research theme in the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre on Social, Political, and Commercial Determinants of Health.

James Guthrie AM is Professor Emeritus of Accounting, Macquarie Business School, Australia. He is a joint founding editor of Accounting, Auditing and Accountability

Journal, which is consistently ranked in the top five globally. James has published 220 articles, 20 books and 45 chapters in books. His research interests include social and environmental accounting, public sector accounting, finance and accountability, intellectual capital, and sustainability of accounting academics. He has over 32,000 citations to his work as measured by Google Scholar.

Richard Hil is Adjunct Professor in the School of Health Sciences and Social Work at Griffith University, Gold Coast; and Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Business, Law and Arts, Southern Cross University.

Renaud Joannes-Boyau is an Associate Professor at Southern Cross University in the Faculty of Science and Engineering specialising in geochronology and geochemistry. Renaud is the Research Leader of the Geoarchaeology and Archaeometry Research Group and the Head of the BIOMICS analytical facility at the Lismore campus. His research focuses on the development and application of micro-analytical techniques to key questions in archaeological sciences, such as the timing of human evolution, ecological niche and early life history.

Stephen Lake is an Honours graduate of Flinders University, and completed his PhD at Cambridge. He held lecturing and research positions at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne, the Universities of Bamberg and Constance, and at ACU, primarily in Late Antique and medieval history and philosophy. Since 2011, he has been unemployed, is currently enrolled in a second PhD on modern German history and philosophy at the University of Sydney, and regularly offers voluntary lecture courses.

Adam Lucas is a senior lecturer in science and technology studies at the University of Wollongong, Australia. His primary research interests are the history and sociology of technology, the politics of climate change and energy policy, and university governance and financial reform. He has a background in journalism and policy development, and has worked for the NSW Government in The Cabinet Office, State and Regional Development, Aboriginal Affairs and Housing. He writes regularly for *Pearls and Irritations* and *Michael West Media*.

Kristen Lyons is a Professor in the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. She is also senior research fellow with the Oakland Institute.

Adrian McCallum is a lecturer in science and engineering at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Prior to commencing his academic career, he served for twenty years across the Australian Defence Forces.

Lareen Newman is a work-stress coach and emotional therapist for academic and professional women. Since 2017 she has worked with many women in Australia and internationally to help them release chronic or acute stress, recover from burnout, and set themselves in a new

direction. From clients, and as a former research fellow and research adviser, she has witnessed the wide-ranging impacts that modern university pressures put on women's health and happiness, and the spillover to homelife.

David Noble's research focusses on national innovation and entrepreneurial systems policy and administration, and in particular the role played by small to medium enterprises. His teaching areas include project and facilities management. His current appointment is as Associate Dean (Education).

Justin O'Connor is Professor of Cultural Economy at the University of South Australia. He was previously professor at the Universities of Monash, Leeds and Manchester Metropolitan. He is visiting Chair in the Department of Cultural Management, Shanghai Jiaotong University. He was UNESCO global expert on cultural policy 2012-2019. Justin has just published *Red Creative: Culture and Modernity in China* (Intellect 2020) and co-edited *Re-Imagining Creative Cities in Asia* (2020). A new book *Art, Culture and the Foundational Economy* will come out in 2022 with Manchester University Press.

John Orr BHMS UQ, LLB (Hon) SCU, PhD (QUT) is a lecturer in corporate law at Law and Justice, Southern Cross University. John Orr is a director of Australia and New Zealand Education Law Association and the past Editor of the *International Journal of Law & Education*.

Alessandro Pelizzon is an academic in Law and Justice at Southern Cross University. He completed his LLB/LLM at the University of Turin in Italy, specialising in comparative law and legal anthropology, and his Doctoral research, conducted at the University of Wollongong, focused on native title and legal pluralism. Alessandro has been exploring the emerging discourse on rights of nature, Wild Law and Earth Jurisprudence since its inception, and he is one of the founding members of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. Alessandro's main areas of research are legal anthropology, legal theory, comparative law, ecological jurisprudence, sovereignty, and Indigenous rights.

Gerd Schröder-Turk (PhD ANU; Dr rer nat habil FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg) is a teaching/research academic at Murdoch University. He is a Fellow of the American Physical Society. He is a member of the Murdoch University Senate and Academic Council and a member of the National Executive of the Australian Institute of Physics. He takes a keen interest in higher education strategies and university governance, and was named in 2019 amongst the Times Higher Education 'People of the Year'.

Margaret Sims is Honorary Professor of Education at Macquarie University, having recently retired from the University of New England. She worked for nearly 20 years in the university sector in Australia, including positions in management as well as traditional academic roles.

She is a life member of the NTEU, having undertaken case management, local Branch President and national Counsellor roles. Her recent publication (*Bullshit Towers*) is an ethnographic exploration of her experiences.

Fern Thompsett is from the Sunshine Coast QLD, and is currently pursuing a PhD in anthropology through Columbia University in New York City.

Peter Tregear is Director of Little Hall, a Principal Fellow of the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne, and an Adjunct Professor of Music at the University of Adelaide. From 2012–2015 he was Head of the Australian National University School of Music. Alongside work as a critic and arts commentator, Tregear's scholarly and performing endeavours centre on early twentieth century Australian and European music history, especially composers whose careers were ruined by the rise of Nazism.

Oliver Vodeb is a Slovenian and Australian critical design theorist, creative practice researcher, student and educator. He is senior lecturer at the RMIT School of Design in Melbourne. Oliver is the principal curator of the Memefest festival of radical design+communication. He has published extensively, has lectured internationally, and has designed and directed dozens of public campaigns and social interventions across the world. He is currently working on a new book *Radical Intimacies*, with Intellect Books UK.

POETRY AUTHORS

Jude Aquilina lives in Milang in rural South Australia with her book piles and three cats. Her poetry is published in Australia and overseas.

Vivian Garner, after raising a large family, completed a Masters degree in creative writing at age 77. Now at age 82 she continues to enjoy writing and has been published in various anthologies and magazines.

Cary Hamlyn is a poet living in Adelaide who has worked in the documentary film industry in Sydney and as a Social Worker and Counsellor in Adelaide. She is the author of two chapbooks – 'Scraping the Night' (Ginninderra Press, 2016) and 'Ultrasound in B-Flat' (Garron Press, 2017) and she has won several prizes, the most notable being the 2017 Satura Prize.

Nathanael O'Reilly's books include *Boulevard*, (Un) *belonging*, *BLUE*, *Preparations for Departure*, *Distance and Symptoms of Homesickness*. His poetry has appeared in publications from fourteen countries, including *Antipodes*, *Cordite*, *fourW*, *Mascara*, *The Newcastle Poetry Prize Anthology 2017* and *Westerly*.

Gemma Parker is a poet and teacher based in Adelaide, Australia. She was recently shortlisted for the Newcastle

Poetry Prize, and her work has been published locally and internationally, including in *Award Winning Australian Writing*, *Transnational Literature*, *Mascara Literary Review* and *Tokyo Poetry Journal*. She is one of the managing editors of *The Saltbush Review*.

Tony Beyer writes in Taranaki, New Zealand.

Rory Harris currently teaches at Playford College in Adelaide's northern suburbs. His most recent collection, *is beach* (2016).

Peter Bakowski is a Melbourne-born poet who writes clear, accessible poems, using ordinary words to say extraordinary things. His poems have appeared in literary magazines worldwide and have been translated into nine languages.

Adelle Sefton-Rowston teaches Literature and Creative Writing at Charles Darwin University. She is author of *Politics and Poetics: race relations and reconciliation in Australian literature*.

John Falzon is a poet living on unceded Ngunnawal land. He is the author of *The language of the unheard* (2012) and *Communists like us* (2017). His work has appeared in *Arena*, *The Canberra Times*, *Eureka Street*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Social Alternatives*, *The Guardian*, *Siglo*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *Scintillas: New Maltese Writing* and elsewhere.

Monumental

The ease of monuments
stone & bronze

& place the past
where we can see it

can rattle it
& the tough bit

what to say
on the plaque

& what will
we tell the children

RORY HARRIS

Little Sister

He'd call to see my brothers,
stand on the verandah
and let the ash build up
on the tip of his smoke
till it sagged – hypnotising to watch
like waiting for a slow drip from a tap –
and somehow he knew without looking
when to flick it away from his feet.

How Marlon Brando, how Simon Templar
he seemed to me as he chatted
to my older brothers, a soft packet
of Camel always tucked
in his upper sleeve
like a robot's bicep.
I longed for his smiling eyes
to notice me, the little sister,
as more than just a kid.

And when he did – and I slid across
the EH Holden's bench seat
closed my eyes and waited,
I went from bliss to gag
at the smell of his Camel breath
and the shocking wet eel
that swam down my throat.
No wonder I never took up smoking.

JUDE AQUILINA