**Australia: reclaiming the public university?**

Simon Batterbury1

Jason Byrne 2

1 Professor of Political Ecology, Lancaster University, UK /Principal Fellow, School of Geography, University of Melbourne, Australia        simonpjb@unimelb.edu.au

2 Associate Professor of Urban and Environmental Planning, Griffith University, Australia jason.byrne@griffith.edu.au

**Introduction**

In their provocative article, Halffman and Radder discuss the Kafkaesque worlds that academics in the Netherlands now find themselves in, as an underfunded university sector predates upon itself and its workforce (2015, p. 165-166). Their academic manifesto observes that many universities in the Netherlands have been 'taken over' by an 'army of professional administrators', who use managerialist approaches to drive performance-based objectives. The country's tertiary institutions, they write, have become obsessively focused on 'accountability' and pursue neoliberal-style imperatives of 'efficiency and excellence'. They paint a portrait of academics under siege, untrusted, and constantly micro-managed. The pursuit of so-called efficiency has involved accountability systems that are themselves wasteful, driving seemingly endless institutional restructuring. Moreover, institutions, the authors claim, have become obsessed with star-performers in research, driven by competitive targets that undergird global rankings. Metrics – publication outputs, journal quality, citations, impact and grant revenue – produce a culture of competition and sometimes, mercenary behaviours, on the part of academics and managers.

Profound changes across the tertiary sector are seen in many other countries, as this collection identifies. Many of these can be traced to shifting patterns of university funding. In the OECD countries, over the last thirty years, public higher education has been reconceived as a commodity (Watts 2016). As a result, students are now the clients, academics are customer-service providers and income earners, and many public universities have become businesses in all but name (Connell 2013). Against this backdrop, Halffman and Radder (2015) point to six major changes that have reconfigured tertiary education:

(i) processes of benchmarking, auditing, and "indicator fetishism" (e.g. targets, quotas);
(ii) a new landscape of competition (e.g. competition for students, research and teaching funding, 'star' professors etc);
(iii) the casualization of university workforces and more unpaid work;

(iv) multiple layers of management and administration, with increasing overheads in grant administration, and public relations, marketing, student support etc.;
(v) a relentless pursuit of excellence – however defined, and
(vi) standardisation – in curricula, learning objectives, workload models, grant templates and personnel management.

These changes in the Netherlands have led to a system that is isolating, anonymous, bureaucratised and universalising, scaffolded by ambition, greed, incompetence and a constant quest for efficiencies and more status. While there may be beacons of light, they are heavily shielded in the article, which makes for depressing reading.

Their provocation prompts two questions, to which we will try to respond:

> 1. How does  Australia compare?
> 2. What can Australian universities and their staff do?

**Similarities and differences**
Tertiary institutions in Australia have experienced similar changes over thirty years. There have been funding cuts, a re-prioritization of higher education, and for academics, new performance-based research and teaching assessment metrics. As academics who have worked in Australia for well over a decade, and with past experience in the United States and the United Kingdom, we have encountered the same issues. One of us was based at a "world top 40" university, one of Australia's oldest and best-resourced, and the other teaches at one of Australia's leading universities in a tier of institutions that are less than 50 years old. Confronting different challenges, both institutions have experienced staff retrenchments, departmental reorganisation, bureaucratic systems of management, and externally-imposed targets.

Australia has several universities that are recognised globally, and a relatively highly educated population (ranking higher than average among OECD countries). It has been relatively untouched so far by recent international debacles beginning to affect higher education, such as immigration restrictions under the Trump Presidency in the USA, Brexit in the United Kingdom, major security threats, or financial meltdown in some European nations. Australia actually entered the 2007 Global Financial Crisis with a budget surplus. Its national governments tend to the right, viewed historically, and are voted in by a predominantly suburban population. International students are keen to study in Australia, and until strong immigration restrictions, also had a good possibility of staying in the country if they wished. Many of the problems we identify can be traced to the contemporary functioning of universities as market institutions, with diminished public funding. The national government is not keen on supporting the costs of a large university sector, even though student participation rates have increased substantially.

*Tertiary education reforms*

From 1974 (under the Whitlam Labor government) until the late 1980s, attending university in Australia was free or at nominal cost. Before this, fees were charged. Higher education was viewed as an important part of nation-building, to develop a competitive workforce, even framed as a 'right'. However, in 1987, universities began to implement student fees, and within the next two years began charging full fees. Under the Dawkins Reforms, the Hawke Labor government introduced legislation to enable students to take out interest-free loans via

a Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). The rationale was degree level education was still regarded as a middle class activity.These loans were repaid through income taxes, after a critical earnings threshold was crossed later in life; a compromise that the Labor party could live with. The HECS system, now renamed, is still operating today .

The Dawkins Reforms also restructured a two-tier sector of 19 universities and 46 colleges /institutes into a 'unified' sector, with close to 40 public universities – many created through mergers. Remaining technical and further education institutions (TAFE) were funded by state governments. These reforms also spurred an increase in international student recruitment, since they paid higher fees. Universities began to compete for Federal research funding – based on their performance and success in meeting national social and economic objectives. The Australian Research Council (ARC) dates to 1988 (independent from 2001), and still awards competitive research grants.

A raft of further reforms saw the growing dominance of free-market principles from the early 1990s. A demand-driven funding system was introduced by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments in 2009. This was based on the [Bradley Review](#) of higher education in 2008, which recommended higher enrolment targets – by 2025 the aim is for 40% of 25-34 year-olds to have a university degree (with a focus on those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds). The Review also reallocated Commonwealth (federal)-funded student places, based on demand, and established a Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) to regulate teaching quality. The ambition was for universities to reorient degrees to focus more on 'skills development', purportedly to meet the needs of the contemporary global economy. In 2014, a Higher Education Bill was narrowly voted down – it would have allowed universities to be 'deregulated', to charge what they saw fit - currently domestic student fees are capped. Universities Australia, the peak university management body, actually supported the 2014 Bill, to the dismay of students. There was only one dissenter – the Vice Chancellor of the small University of Canberra, Stephen Parker, who deemed unregulated fees to be unethical and unfair ([https://theconversation.com/stephen-parker-higher-education-changes-a-fraud-on-the-electorate-34909](https://theconversation.com/stephen-parker-higher-education-changes-a-fraud-on-the-electorate-34909)). But in 2017, the government wants to raise student contributions to university fees, sharpenloan repayment conditions, and make government funding to universities made subject to additional  performance criteria.

Raewyn Connell (2013, 2015) traces much of the financial and bureaucratic measures in Australia back to the Dawkins reforms of the 1980s. She argues that after redesigning the tertiary sector in the ways described above,

> "The next step was to find someone else to pay [for funding education], and a neoliberal solution was at hand: fees. The federal government share of university funding began an astonishing collapse, from around 90 percent of university budgets at the start of the 1990s to around 45 percent now. Student fees have risen, decade after decade, to compensate" (Connell 2015: 24).

The results are striking. For example, an international PhD student at the University of Melbourne will pay around AU$36,000 (€24,555) per year in 2017 (discounting is discretionary), an international Science undergraduate AU$39,680 (€27,065), and AU$29,728 (€20,277) in Arts - the latter at Griffith would pay in excess of AU$26,500 (€18,075). These fees, some of which are a little lower that equivalent public US universities, are not profit-making when fed into university budgets, or outrageously greedy – they are essential. Institutions have to cross-subsidise their research and teaching using revenue from

international and other fee-paying students. The high Australian dollar and difficulty in sustaining international enrolments make this a difficult task.

The obvious solution, as Connell (2015) argues, is to fund universities adequately from public funds, with suitable checks and balances, given this is an affluent nation in which universities play a vital economic role. But no government has chosen this route since the 1980s, and government funding has not even kept up with inflation. Budgeting pressures cascade down to academics and professional staff. Universities, caught up in the New Public Management with its "metrification of 'quality'" obsession (Lorenz 2015 p.7) now vie to outcompete each other, and to attract domestic and international students based on their reputations. Australian universities have fully embraced international university rankings. Vice-Chancellors and university marketing machines are quick to publicise any improvements in their position (online, and around the campus). Reputations are buttressed by spending on campus infrastructure, even if this is at the expense of more personnel; dining and recreational facilities, on-campus accommodation and so-on. Some of these generate needed revenue. Capital expansion is in part to accommodate more students, but 'quality' of facilities and 'student experience' count towards rankings, and this helps meet costs through enrolments.

**The Wolf in Australia**

Most (or a significant percentage of) academics are on some form of permanent or multi-year contracts. Most are paid adequate salaries because they are a skilled workforce and potential revenue earners. With the decline in core public funding, income generation has become just as essential as generating "knowledge" and ideas, and it is a feature of annual performance evaluations at most universities. Furthermore, there is no academic tenure, which makes retrenchment possible if finances are tight (for a debate on tenure, see Batterbury 2008). The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) represents and fights to protect academics and professional staff, through collective bargaining agreements at each institution. These are hard-won. The NTEU has become increasingly important as universities have sought to respond to fiscal austerity by tightening budgets, retrenching staff, switching to online course delivery and converting the workforce to a higher percentage of (cheaper) sessional teachers and researchers, on short-term contracts. Sessional lecturers are probably doing up to half of all teaching in Australia, although figures are not available (Connell 2015). Thanks to the NTEU, the hourly rates for teaching, marking and tutorial work are generally good (much better than in North America), but as in the Netherlands and other countries, sessional academics can become trapped, with massive teaching loads and little time for their own research.

Neoliberal management has ushered in a tier of highly paid executives, suggesting cost savings are not equally distributed. Vice Chancellors (Presidents) of Australian universities now receive annual salaries of up to AUD $1 million (€709,100). They are supported by layers of management – Deputy Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors, Deans, Assistant Deans and Heads of School, with salaries from around AUD$200,000 to almost AUD$500,000. The situation varies across the sector but the irony of an over-paid echelon of managers telling overworked academics to 'work smarter' is not lost on academic and professional staff. As funding dries up, class sizes increase, teaching loads blow out, bureaucratic processes multiply and colleagues are retrenched or leave due to high rates of stress, anxiety and depression, why should millions be paid to management? Disputes over working conditions have yet to translate into large-scale strikes and protests – in part, because

poor pay is less of an issue for the of cohort permanent academic staff than in some other countries.

Another feature of cost reduction is 'restructuring'. It is less visible in the top-ranked universities (the Group of Eight), and it is not always successful. At La Trobe University in the early 2010s, a large reduction in humanities and social sciences staffing was reduced after protest and strong action (Bode and Dale 2012). Professor Judith Bessant's firing at RMIT was a test case of line-management power – it was overturned in the courts which found RMIT contravened the Fair Work Act, and the university did not appeal (Bessant 2015). But both of us have experienced departmental and broader faculty reshuffles, regularly losing and gaining colleagues, degrees and facilities under a new 'Business Plan' each time. In the younger universities, some Departments have been merged into super-departments, folded into larger Schools, which sit within Faculties – each requiring oversight from a managerial class but saving on administrative posts. Research and teaching are bifurcated in some cases, where teaching is managed by Heads of School and Deans, and research by Research Centre Directors. This creates further layers of bureaucracy and fragmentation, although there are exceptions. Melbourne has created a single School of Geography for research and teaching, but only after a whole Faculty (Land and Environment) was axed and merged into two others.

Because the academics function as an income-earning resource, the professional staff are usually the first to suffer during budget shortfalls. Across the sector, Australian universities have cut functions like student support to the bone. For example, the Business Improvement Program at the University of Melbourne (2013-2016) was announced on the back of a financial shortfall. Some 540 administrative jobs were targeted for termination by 1 January 2016. We do not know how many actually went, but many people lost work, reapplied in competition with each other for fewer jobs, and functions were moved online (Campbell and Morrissey 2015). Griffith University has had rounds of retrenchments, redundancies and 'voluntary early retirements'. Student centres at both universities and across the country, once numerous and offering personalised support for enrolments and other queries, have been downsized or replaced, in one of our institutions by AI-based 'helplines' such as IBM Watson. Remaining human support has been centralised and therefore reduced. IT support has also become centralized, or outsourced, with substantial job losses and oftentimes, marginal financial benefits. Mailrooms have closed, various systems automated and linked to smart phone apps, and marketing and school outreach have been consolidated and centralised. The aim is to save salary costs. Efficiency has resulted in some areas, but oftentimes with higher workloads or those remaining, and substantially less human contact and therefore conviviality.

The two universities we know best have followed different routes. Melbourne is a well-ranked university and oversubscribed with student applicants. The most pervasive result of New Public Management at Melbourne is struggles over how their fees are allocated. Faculties and most departments are given financial targets, and must meet them. But for several years now, faculties have been in competition with each other to 'capture' student fees. There are 'ownership' disputes for classes and whole degrees, with fears of 'fee leakage' to other faculties. This does affect student choice, often narrowing most 'elective' classes on a degree to those taught in the most central faculty. Arguing over undergraduate degree 'ownership' has continued since a major restructure took place in the mid-2000s, the 'Melbourne Model'. An Academic Board adjudicates, but a new degree was established in 2017, with the majority of fees accruing to one faculty, more so than the one it has essentially replaced.

At Griffith, a range of degree offerings have been consolidated into larger units – such as a generic Bachelor of Science. Similar to Melbourne faculties are becoming concerned about leaking student load and income. Unlike Melbourne, Griffith is often forced to manage its entry scores to attract enough students to 'meet quota'. Academics then have to support and scaffold student learning, when a growing number of students (often from non-traditional backgrounds), may lack adequate study skills. This has increased rates of attrition, which are closely monitored by management, and has placed an additional burden on academics to change their assessments, course delivery mode, offer improved student experiences, follow up students with one-on-one meetings, and undertake other 'pastoral care' efforts to maximise retention. Much of this is attributable to the "permanent competition" in the sector identified by Halffman and Redder (2015).

*Individual performance metrics*

Academics are now experiencing quantified, individual performance targets. These are relatively recent. These can apply to publications, 'grant capture' and even evaluation of teaching. Targets are a feature of the commercial world too, and always cause stress. Individual performance could be managed much more sympathetically and more supportively without hard targets, and through regular feedback. Hard targets mean in the last instance, noncompliant individuals can be sanctioned or retrenched. Research success is now defined as much by winning Nationally Competitive Grants and 'soft money' consultancy contracts – as by publications. ARC or the medical NHMRC grants are hard to get with success rates below 15% for several disciplines (ARC Discovery: 17.8%, 2017; NHMRC project grants 2016, 15.2%). Those who win them can insulate themselves against higher teaching loads, which are often borne by early-career academics or those deemed not to be so research-active. 'Grant capture' and publications in top-ranked journals with high impact factors, also sway hiring and promotion decisions – much more so than teaching excellence or public outreach (no matter that a grant is nothing more than an *input* – money to conduct research, not an *output,* and some researchers have little need of them). Doing research cheaply is not rewarded at all (Martin 2011)! Neither is publishing ethically and cheaply – open access and outside the commercial publishers that are crippling university library budgets. Taking many years to produce a stellar edited volume, for example, without top journal articles, is punished because this does not win the university sufficient points during national research excellence appraisals. In their worst forms, injunctions on research input and output are close to being breaches of academic freedom, and they have worsened significantly over the last decade. Critics like Lorenz argue that "professions need professional autonomy in order to function properly and [that] quantified control makes this impossible" (2015: 7). Indeed.

Teaching is also subject to scrutiny and performance metrics – adding to stress. Oversight of quality is needed, but The Australian Quality Framework has standardised curricula. 'Learning outcomes' are now driving assessment. These are required in course profiles, which are contracts between academics and students for service delivery. Academics are assessed annually by centrally administered, mandatory student performance evaluations of both teaching and course experiences, as happens in many countries. Repeated failure to achieve teaching evaluation targets can have some effect on promotion and job prospects – even though international literature cautions that numerical values cannot be used to assess 'quality'.

Internal support for research and conference attendance has dropped at the institutions we know. An automatic right to a research sabbatical is now rare. Academics are expected (or

forced) to undertake a good deal of research work outside a 40 hour week – yet are exhorted to have a good work-life balance. Those encountering stress and depression are given little sympathy, typically told to telephone an outsourced counselling helpline and to access 3 free sessions of counselling per year.

All of this might be bearable if there was sympathy, opposition and protest by the university workforce. Constant struggle against inequity and pressure is materially and symbolically important, and a key feature of healthy workplaces. But many Australian academics, and professional staff, remain silent. Actual dissent is muted as people worry about the implications of protest. Hope lies with the 'stars' –the full professors whose services are too good or too lucrative to lose. But even there, collective action is rare. Many professors are not accustomed to such struggles, and sadly they may share some of the values of the management – their success is, after all, because they achieved the required targets, benefited from them, or because they were fortunate enough to have climbed the food chain before the structural reforms to tertiary education really began to bite. Many senior academics reproduce exhortations to staff to publish in top journals, obtain grants, and boost departmental success. Yet there are plenty of examples of 'top academics' and executive-level managers being unable to achieve the same key performance indicators as the lowly staff they harass and cajole. In addition, if they were people on "normal salaries, who prioritise intellectual content and public interest over reputation" (Halffman and Radder 2015:176) then perhaps they would be more likely to side with their overworked colleagues. This would solve many issues with one stroke.

**Conclusion**

In sum, many of Halffman and Redder's (2015) points ring true in Australia. But academics are not yet under desperate siege in our better-funded universities, even if restructuring and the quest for even higher rankings has been onerous. There are many clusters of decent, hardworking and convivial people that socialise together and even have time for some blue-sky thinking and research. Australia has many foreign academics that still find its universities much better, and more tolerant, than those in their own countries. But many others are hunkered down, trying to meet the next target or deadline, and it is our belief that this is more and more common as performance metrics and rankings have taken on greater importance. It is mid- to lower-salary professional staff, predominantly women, who have suffered the most. As the British Athena-Swan gender equality accreditation system reaches Australia, these and other issues are beginning to be scrutinised. Herculean efforts have kept teaching quality good enough to continue to attract students, but perhaps too many of them, and certainly with fees that are already high when cost of living is taken into account. In the mid-to-lower ranked institutions, academic life can be become almost unbearable. There is widespread burnout, high staff turnover, low morale, and some departmental closures and retrenchments. Again there are exceptions and clusters of goodwill, but the structural conditions of persistent underfunding can easily close them down.

We concur with most of Halffman and Redder's (2015) manifesto of 21 points to alleviate the pain of neoliberal university bureaucracy and its unethical outcomes. But Australian problems begin outside the university sector. With its vast resource-rich landmass and small population, Australia is strongly embedded in the neoliberal mindset and there is little willingness among the general public to fully fund its public universities through taxation. Many students want degrees that will position them in a nation that is largely neoliberal and business-focussed. While we agree a university should be "aimed at the common good"

(p.175), the Australian version says that students (and maybe industry) should pay, not the state. Connell (2015) wants an end to Australian student fees and advocates a return to adequate support to universities from the public purse. Even if we could get 'star' professors to protest metrification and high fees, a prerequisite for change is a national government much more committed to the public university.

We return where we began – the problem is systemic, and financial. Running a university means managing a huge budget, paying hundreds or thousands of staff, and keeping the lights on. An ethical university, if we could somehow get back to that, will not come cheap, and this cannot be ignored (Bode and Dale, 2012). Ending inter-faculty competition, and muting inter-university competition, is something that can be done by agreement (possible through centralised revenue distribution, with staff input into the models used, and de-emphasising rankings and metrics). Restoring academic autonomy is also essential: this will not be easy, because metrification begins at the top, where research funding and the remaining block grants also come from.

Apparently, FJ Foakes Jackson once said to a new academic at Cambridge: "It's no use trying to be clever – we are all clever here; just try to be kind – a little kind" (the exact citation is hard to locate). Restoring cultures of conviviality, respect and cooperation can increase the power of collective resistance and resilience at a small scale. All students and staff would benefit. We need academics that can 'take back' the university, rather than grudgingly accepting the inequalities and the workloads - currently they are a minority. A university should *trust* its staff and students. And, academics want more than a pat on the back for their achievements. If they could practice "slow" scholarship (Berg and Seeber 2016; Mountz et al 2015), meet practical and ethical responsibilities, and support academic and professional colleagues more, then we would feel more confident about the future of Australian university life. For this we need less bureaucratic oversight from people who are not qualified, experienced or able to foster work cultures of support and collegiality. Again, this is a sweeping statement because it conceals vast differences across the sector. But Australia needs less New Public Management, and more "confidence governance", as Sweden has recognised.

Most embarrassingly, Connell (2015, p. 24) points out that in Australia,

> "The universities are now full of fake accountability. At the same time, they have turned to public-relations techniques to attract potential students and donors and burnish the organization's image. The corporate university now projects to the world a glossy fantasy of broad lawns, relaxed students, happy staff, spacious buildings, and eternal Australian sunshine. The cultural rationale of universities as bearers of truth, of rigorous thought, is becoming deeply compromised."

This phantasmagorical image conceals a troubling and sometimes unpleasant underside, as well as many decent people struggling hard to keep the Wolf from the door. And that really hurts.

**References**

Batterbury, S.P.J. 2008. Tenure or permanent contracts in North American higher education? A critical assessment. *Policy Futures in Education* 6 (3): 286-297. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2008.6.3.286

Berg, M., and Seeber, B. 2016. *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Bessant, J. 2015. 'Smoking Guns': Reflections on Truth and Politics in the University. In Thornton, M (ed.) Through a Glass Darkly: the social sciences look at the neoliberal university. Canberra: ANU Press. 229-258.

Bode, K. and Dale, L 2012. 'Bullshit'? An Australian Perspective; or, What can an organisational change impact statement tell us about higher education in Australia? *Australian Humanities Review* 53: 1-15. http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2012/11/01/bullshit-an-australian-perspective-or-what-can-an-organisational-change-impact-statement-tell-us-about-higher-education-in-australia/

Campbell M. & P. Morrissey (eds.). 2015. *The People's Tribunal: An Inquiry into the 'Business Improvement Program' at The University of Melbourne*. Melbourne: Discipline.

Connell, R. 2013. Neoliberalism and Higher Education: the Australian Case. Universities in Crisis - Blog of the International Sociological Association (ISA). http://www.isa-sociology.org/universities-in-crisis/?p=994

Connell, R. 2015. Australian universities under neoliberal management: the deepening crisis. *International Higher Education* 81: 23-25 DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2015.81.8740

Halffman, W. and Radder, H. 2015 The academic manifesto: from an occupied to a public university *Minerva: A Review of Science, Learning and Policy*, 53: 165-187. http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11024-015-9270-9/fulltext.html

Lorenz, C. 2015. The Metrification of 'Quality' and the Fall of the Academic Profession. *Oxford Magazine* Hilary, Trinity: 7-11. http://platform-hnu.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Lorenz_Metrification__of_Quality_OM.pdf

Martin, B. 2011. ERA: adverse consequences. *Australian Universities' Review* 53(2): 99-102.

Mountz, A., Bonds, A., Mansfield, B., Loyd, J., Hyndman, J., Walton-Roberts, M., Basu, R., Whitson, R., Hawkins, R., Hamilton, T., and Curran, W. 2015. For slow scholarship: A feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 14(4): 1235-1259 https://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/acme/article/view/1058/1141

Watts, R., 2016. The idea of 'marketising' the university: against magical thinking. *Public Universities, Managerialism and the Value of Higher Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 147-179.