

Behind voluntary redundancy in universities

The stories behind the story

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At a time when universities internationally participate in continual processes of restructuring, repositioning and reprioritising, calls for 'voluntary' redundancy among teaching and learning staff become frequent events. Australian and New Zealand academics, whose stories inform this study, have, particularly, been made subject to severance, voluntary or otherwise, at a time when the modernised university has become the managed, neoliberalised university and, over time, the 'ruined' or 'toxic' university. This study is a narrative enquiry aiming to capture, re-present and examine the stories of mid- and late-career higher education teaching professionals during this unsettling period of disturbance and flux. In the light of studies on 'voluntary' redundancy and scholarship critiquing the mechanisms of power and repression of the corporatised university, this researcher asked 12 mid-career academics why they really took redundancy packages with a view to exposing the experienced truth behind the official institutional story that academic professionals 'chose' voluntary redundancy packages.

Keywords: academic identity, narrative enquiry, neoliberalism, toxicity, voluntary redundancy, Max Weber

Introduction and framework

This study brings forward possible and likely truths that lie behind tenured academics' decisions to take voluntary redundancies despite their jobs involving edifying, rewarding and 'passion' work. In other words, the legality of the severance agreement stresses a voluntary motivation, a choice; but the actuality behind the decision points to a range of histories, of backstories. This researcher asked 12 mid-career academics why they really took redundancy packages. Their stories reveal a raft of themes now commonplace in the literature of the 'ruined university'. This paper aims to develop the theory that what appears at an institutional level to be voluntary is in fact as far from a choice as imaginable.

It is risky to speak of 'truths' when my methodology is that of an interpretivist narrative enquiry into individuals' decisions to leave tenured positions via 'voluntary'

redundancy. I will speak more explicitly about the epistemological and ethical components shortly. My reference to 'truths' needs contextualisation. It comes from my reflections on the methodological anti-positivism and resolute interpretivism of the anti-capitalist sociologist, Max Weber (1864-1920). I was drawn, particularly, to his 1915 description (in *The Methodology of Social Sciences*, trans. 1949, p.176) of 'the skeletal structure of causal attributions and truths' (*das feste Skelett der kausale Zurechnung*). Such 'attributions', he maintained, lie behind the 'facade' of narrative history and their presence differentiates a work of knowing from a fiction.

This led me to wonder how these fabrications, based on the superficial story (the facade), become the official stories. In other words – and it is not possible to paraphrase without calling Foucault to mind – official history is fabricated by the legalistic stories of the powerful. This historical process

leaves behind the potent versions of truth embodied in the stories of the disempowered. Foucault (1980) argued that knowledge and understanding are constituted and socially constructed under conditions of power. The production of knowledge reproduces particular discursive practices, such as those of compliance and performativity in universities, which become indicative of individuals' various alignments with social groups, including those of, variously, the powerful and the resistant.

These reflections on Weber are relevant because those of us recording stories of what happened, in my case the backstories to voluntary redundancies in higher educational contexts in Australia and New Zealand in the late 2010s and early 2020s, strive to write in the spaces of history while it is still raw. Weber believed we can understand the occluded but true stories by interpreting the actions of 'ideal types', figures who represent the many or the collective. This study retells the stories of ideal types, typical personages marginalised in the larger story of the neoliberal occupation of higher education. The stories foreground the accidental, irrational, emotional and socio-political factors absent from the powerful master-narratives. Weber might suggest these are the kind of factors that might truthfully contribute to a reconstruction of the human narratives behind historic events. These are the stories behind 'the story'.

The stories, alongside the metanarrative of this article that curates them, throw light on the reflective strategies enacted by those leaving academic positions. This study fleshes out the skeletons, a metaphor for naked truth, within the stories. Tearing away the facade, we discover the story that these redundancies were voluntary is in fact the official master-narrative maintaining that people chose to exit. The truth is that people certainly made decisions but they did not have the choices the concept of 'voluntariness' suggests.

I mentioned 12 mid-career academics, and 12 contributed written or verbal data. My method was based on principles of reflectivity: write or speak about the following question, *Why did you take voluntary redundancy from your university position?* I wanted to understand underlying thinking and motivations, push and pull factors, processes of reasoning and strategies for survival. I wanted to know what informed their decisions. The 12 academics created texts, either a page of text or an equivalent voice recording. However, the process of remembering and, hence, reliving, led half my participants to texts they knew had to be withdrawn. Their words were 'too close to the bone', 'bringing back ghosts', 'best to let bygones be bygones' and 'let sleeping dogs lie' – and I had permission to use those quotes in lieu of narratives. I now have six texts. I retell their reconfigured stories after surveying relevant literature and clarifying the methodology.

Literature

The ruined university

Writings about leaving ruined universities are omnipresent. Studies are plentiful (Joseph, 2015; Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019). Some book titles are *The Ruined University* (Readings, 1996), *The Toxic University* (Smyth, 2017) and *Whakademia* (Hil, 2012). Barcan (2013; 2019) investigated why academics leave; she identified the generation most at risk of lose-lose: those in their late '40s to '50s. In studies of the academic identity, loss is a huge theme (Smith et al., 2016). The umbrella socio-political terms in the literature of 'the ruined university' are rationalisation, intensification, privatisation, marketisation, metricisation (Barker, 2017) – and responsabilisation. Unfurling since the 1980s, 'academic capitalism', interested primarily in brand management, world ranking and competitive market share, has long been disenfranchising educators of integrity. The master-discourse of the marketplace has laid waste to the halcyon language of researching, teaching, learning and service. Readings (1996, p.188) warned the university would become 'an autonomous collective subject who is authorised to say 'we' and to terrorise those who do not, or cannot, speak in that "we"'. We can now see that the powerful royal 'we' of the master-narrative has terrorised the 'we' who speak in my narratives into voluntary redundancy.

Scholars concur that business model jargon imported includes 'compliance', 'performance measurement', 'performativity', 'productivity', 'transparency', 'accountability', 'engagement', 'audit' and 'metrics' (even 'qualimetrics'). Further, key weasel nouns of the master-discourse include 'efficiency' (countable 'efficiencies'), 'excellence', 'merit', 'quality' (as in 'quality assured'), 'impact factor' and 'ratings', along with the institutionally-required warrior qualities: 'resilience', 'flexibility', 'agility'. Lorenz (2012) believes that 'new public management' 'parasitises the everyday meanings of (its) concepts ... and simultaneously perverts all their original meanings' (Lorenz, 2012, p.600). The weasel words of the 'official' discourse, while unmoral, still become the dominant discourse in faculty meetings and other sites of Foucauldian control. Our increasingly ephemeral work is defined in relation to managerialist master-discourse terms such as: 'business model', 'best practice', 'innovation', 'renewal', 'restructure', 'benchmarking', 'output', 'operational plan', 'grant capture', 'commitment', 'change management', 'viability' and, in an impure form, 'sustainability'. If you feel bombarded by jargon, the effect is purely intentional. (Faculty Meeting Bingo cards may now be downloaded as a 'sanity saver').

With these words, the institutional story of voluntary redundancy is told. 'The bullshitter', Lorenz (2012) tells us, 'is only interested in effects and does not necessarily believe in what he states himself' (p.560). Those who embrace this lexicon became, Giroux (2002) wrote, 'competitive

self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain' (p.429). Those whose consciences could not endure the hidden truth behind this 'facade' language became sick, engaged in acts of resistance, or left, either 'voluntarily' or of their own freewill. To use the metaphors of the scholarship, they become the 'ideal types' of 'ninjas', 'zombies' or 'nervous wrecks' (Barker, 2016; Ryan, 2012), the latter suffering survivor guilt (Sutton, 2019). Foucault would see the ninjas as compliant but self-regulated individuals, leveraging power by embracing the entrepreneurial possibilities of corporate organisational cultures. The zombies are co-opted subjects, surviving repression by a sacrifice of integrity but unable to do otherwise as they are captured by academic capitalism. The nervous wrecks recognise that they have been both branded and repressed. Survivor guilt comes from the self-knowledge that they may have betrayed themselves and embraced repression, while others have regained power through exit. Although nervous wrecks are ethically torn, their choice to remain perpetuates the systems of repression.

Voluntary redundancy

Studies of voluntary redundancy (VR) as a phenomenon are still rare, apart from several in Australia. Those that exist belong to Industrial Relations. Turnbull (1988, p.32), for instance, identified the fact that VR was seldom voluntary: 'the voluntary element refers only to the process whereby those to be dismissed for redundancy are selected, rather than the decision on the need for redundancy'. He adds parenthetically, 'the latter remains the cornerstone of managerial prerogative'. This is prophetic because in Australia in 2015 law changes gave employers freedom in how they dealt with VR (Joseph, 2015), and it is this freedom, coupled with the imperatives of managerialism, that provides the analytic contexts for this narrative.

During the more neutral period of the 2000s when the discourse revolved around 'retrenchment' and 'downsizing', Clarke (2007) presents voices of both 'victims' and 'survivors' in themes, the first of which is 'Just how voluntary?' One participant ironically notes, 'I love the way they've labelled it voluntary redundancy. It just seems to be a nice name to put on the fact that they're booting someone out and they don't really have a choice' (p.81). Here we see the facade ('nice name') of voluntariness in the official narrative contrasted with the experienced truth: lack of choice and displacement. In Clarke's study, regret, income loss and low morale emerged as themes. His study sees VR as attractive in contrast to other forms of retrenchment – so long as it is managed strategically.

Two studies focus on the university (Joseph, 2015; Watson, 2011). Watson examines how 'dominant discourses are operationalised in the university through everyday communications, which serve to construct an institutional identity, and how, in turn, this impacts on the development of

academic identities' (p.957). These discourses, represented in the jargon above, obfuscate transparency, foster unsustainable untruths about excellence and accountability and choreograph a logic of marketisation. This is important because it also suggests institutions have a master-narrative, circulated and normalised discursively 'the story' of my title. The danger of 'the story' is that 'the rhetoric of managerialism can change the way academics see themselves' (Joseph, 2015, p.158), leading them away from self-belief and self-care. Sowing seeds of self-doubt is a key strategy of managerialism (Vaillancourt, 2020); so, too, is the imposition of imposter syndrome. Joseph (2015, p.139) demonstrates that the costs of management imposing their will to 'win at all costs' consist in a corrosion of valuable aspects of academic work: collegiality, relational networking, trust and information-sharing. Instead are toxic fear and hyper-competitiveness. Within the discourse of VR, individuals were still targeted. The game of bad faith involved 'cheating' and was a 'sham' (p.158). The stories I provide in this paper offer instances of these phenomena.

The slippery concept of *voluntariness* deserves scrutiny, though its legal and philosophical subtleties can only be acknowledged here. Like the jargon italicised above, *voluntary* is a word that was migrated from its pastoral, ethical and philosophical associations of good work, care, absence of coercion and freewill to become a term of moral ambiguity as in such collocations as 'voluntary committal', 'voluntary euthanasia', 'voluntary liquidation' or 'voluntary severance'; where, in each case, the degree of voluntariness differs and the position of agency in the backstory changes. In such cases, as Clarke's (2007) critique stressed, the imperative of financial incentive creates an appearance of democracy (it's offered to all) and kindness (money's good, right?) not found in compulsory severance and enables a time for reflection. An offer of voluntary redundancy is also not the same in all contexts or at all stages of life. This may be why impacts are greater on mid-career professionals in universities (Barcan, 2013; 2019). This study excludes those who took an early retirement option or novice academics leaving believing the grass is still green. However, in the ruined university, for those mid-career folk impacted, offers of 'voluntary' severance appear to result either in a health-prioritising decision or a moral decision to draw a line under a vocation which has changed so much that it has become morally and psychologically unbearable. To stay, like the three ideal types described above, is, in fact, the Faustian bargain Ball (2003) described: you become the self-promotional 'ninja', the subject completely and willingly colonised by Neoliberalism; or you live on (an aspect of the 'zombie') or wring your hands in guilt (Ryan, 2012).

As Watson (2011) and Joseph (2015) argued, 'voluntary' in 'voluntary redundancies' is a sham because its message is brutal, coming from the standpoint of the business model despite pretence to user-friendliness (Clarke, 2007). The

process begins with a rationale about 'the size and efficient use of staffing required to meet objectives or financial constraints', to quote Oxford University's (typical) *Redundancy procedure* (2019, online). The next stage, identifying the redundancy pool, is where problems lurk because metrics are used and metrics are never neutral. Rather, they are fraught with power games, nepotism, favouritism and post-truth politics. Next, because this rationale demands a quantity of severances, that quantity will be met, 'voluntarily' or not, and the university begins a new game: 'Fair' selection of staff for redundancy, with 'fairness' based on more metrics manufactured and interpreted by somebody powerful; i.e. not fair after all. In an issue of *Queensland Nurse* (Anonymous, 2012, p.30) we read: 'Emails from departing health workers saying their goodbyes to colleagues tell the real story behind the so-called 'voluntary redundancy'. Accessing emails offers an ethical and logistic challenge to researchers; here I access similar backstories from elicited narratives. The article continues: 'Many clearly feel they have been backed into a corner and have no better option – hardly "voluntary"' (p.30); the stories retold here also follow this trajectory.

Voluntary redundancies are, Academics Anonymous (2018) wrote, 'in reality compulsory redundancies with a severance package' (online). Academics Anonymous are a community of practice in Australia meeting underground outside the surveying eye of the Foucauldian panopticon. Sutton (2019) reports that David Hunter was made redundant from Flinders University (Adelaide) because a restructure left no teaching specialist position in his field: 'The redundancy is not voluntary in the actual sense of the word. He reapplied in a related discipline but was rejected: 'It's voluntary in the sense that if somebody puts a gun to your head and says, 'give me all your money', it's a voluntary choice to do so rather than get shot by a gun'. In what is arguably the definitive modern philosophical critique of freedom and voluntariness, Pink (2016) argues voluntariness is a power of the will or of motivation to get us to act as willed. Importantly, 'will' has a non-voluntary component. This is important because this motivation to get people to act as willed points to the lack of choice in 'voluntary' redundancies among academic professionals; those cited above and those whose stories follow.

Methodology

This study functions as a broadly constructivist narrative enquiry written in alignment with an interest in Weber's subjectivist methodological individualism. It is interpretivist because, as the creator of this metanarrative you read, I

interpret facets of the study, including the experiential and human components. This interpretivist nature appears in my interest in such social constructions as language, consciousness and the question of invested, privileged power perspectives in what pretends to be shared discourse about academic work. This work is transactional since I have experience of the phenomenon of voluntary redundancy among mid-career academics, both personally and as an observer. These factors validate the study because of the trustworthiness and honesty of the data as well as the participatory nature of the study, and, interestingly, the 'not-data' is also functional, as described above. The approach is naturalistic as it relates both to its selection of participants from the world of the enquiry and its initial method of data collection, in this case a single-question interview elicited either as a written piece or a spoken word document for transcription. This choice of modes relates

to how participants might prefer to reflect on, access and record stories of their recent history which may still contain embedded trauma.

This work draws on work in narrative enquiry and ethnography in that its 'truth'

comes from the authentic stories of lived experience of those close to the phenomenon over time, understanding how the individual and the cultural are interconnected (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). The social reality of the narrator becomes the object of enquiry. Narratives, Clandinin (2013) argued, start in and resume in the middle of experience and need to foreground participants' temporality, sociality and places. My stories can be regarded as a data set, since their stories address my enquiry, and also align with Bruner's (1985) 'narrative knowing'. This means, as Polkinghorne (1995) echoes, that these stories, presented as narrative analysis – that is, the stories themselves as data – reflect, or sometimes refract, a knowable reality, set within a framework of my curation.

The 12 participants came forward voluntarily as the result of a call at an international education conference in Australia, where attendees were given fliers. This act of purposeful sampling limited the respondents to some extent to those linked to education, yet three participants came from divergent disciplines. There was an equal spread of genders, and their age range corresponded with the information in the call, and ended up being 47-63, with all participants having been in higher education for at least a decade, and all but two for 20 years or more. There were no participants who identified as Indigenous, and I acknowledge this as a limitation.

The six participants, who agreed that I could use edited versions of their stories, are attributed here with pseudonyms and identifying details have been fictionalised or substituted with lacunae or critical incidents from my own story. These

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six retold stories are, hence, valid representations of their experiences, and as the researcher, I can state that similar tales were told in the six suppressed stories and in those of colleagues not part of the study whose stories mirror those retold here. The six participants who withdrew did so for reasons of health and safety, but they did not need the counsellor I had made available. Rosenwald (1992, p.275) observed, “not only does the past live in the present, but it also appears different at every new turn we take.’ Mine is a topic where ghosts and their ancestors still have their mark.

I now (re)present the stories of ‘ideal types’, whose language foregrounds the power struggle between the ‘skeleton’ and the ‘facade.’ I ask the reader to discover reasons behind participants’ voluntary redundancy, in the process considering what may or may not be ‘voluntary’ about their decisions.

1. Diana (59), Former Dean of Research (*Suburban Australian dual-sector university*)

This was the fifth restructure in six years, and my team in the research and development area had dwindled from 12 to 4. The fifth restructure brought with it the dread of the voluntary redundancy, for which we had to apply as an ‘opportunity’. As a senior academic, I had been accustomed to being consulted during times of change, but I had lost, last round, three key colleagues in arms. They fell on their dignified swords in an early retirement option. These colleagues had esteemed me and my lifelong work, and I was left in a division suffering from cultural amnesia. No-one was left to acknowledge the decades of recognised excellence and experience I had in supporting graduate students through their increasingly complex and bureaucratic candidatures. The work I had done in uniting eclectic staff and creating professional development programs and curating conferences was forgotten and irrelevant.

The crunch came when I was told to apply for my own job as Dean of Research, this time with ‘Executive’ in front. As a well-published professor with a strong on-campus and national reputation, I felt indignant, insulted, affronted. The position description had changed. Its freight was heavily managerialist and quantitative outcomes-focused: numbers of completions, revenue for completions, budget management for the centralisation of postgraduate outputs. The list of KPIs caused anxieties I thought my hardened experience would have protected me from: six committees; accountability for stricter timeliness and for reducing leaves of absence; responsibility for ensuring annual quality reports and supervisory audits, managing candidature milestones, which had doubled in number and paperwork. I had to break it to staff that research supervision was now effectively ‘by committee’ with feedback coming primarily from milestone feedback from assessors who had played no role in the personal learning journeys of students, and that research supervision was increasingly less of

a pedagogical negotiation with mentors. The number of hours shared by supervisory cohorts had been slashed to what I knew was an impossible number of hours, fewer than 50. The words ‘student’ or ‘learner’ were absent. The insights from a national grant-funded research program I had overseen and which were to have been implemented were ignored. There were ‘accountabilities’, expected outcomes, performance indicators and matrices for how these would be evaluated, and new software to ‘facilitate’ everything, for which there would be compulsory training sessions.

I had loved working closely with postgraduate students and they were grateful for the support. My passion came from my direct work with learners, as an enabler, facilitator, experienced supervisor-in-chief. I brokered those ‘a-ha’ moments where students experienced the removal of a blockage or made a realisation that made a difference. It was clear that none of these activities played any part in what my position had become. I set aside the document to reread in the evening after or during a wine. By the time I had finished my second reading, I knew instantly that the person specified was certainly not me. The travail of the three months until the redundancy was to become active is a ‘hero’s journey’ story of its own, and I just might get around to writing it.

2. Carl (56), Former Senior Academic (*leading urban New Zealand university*)

I write an experience-based reflective piece describing the backstory of my, and, unavoidably, my colleagues’, voluntary redundancies. In my experience, 1986 was the year neoliberalist reforms began what we now experience in 2020 as a process of devastation, ruination. It was also the year my university work began, and my grades, passion and ‘habitus’ as a scholar promised a great career. In 2018, I watched distinguished academics get hand-picked for redundancy in music and humanities at two local universities. In 2016, I’d observed a more negotiated, but agonising, process of academic-redundancy-making at another university within the same disciplines, and in 2018-19 administrative staff faced rationalisation. Earlier in 2013 and 2015, I’d witnessed acts of obscenity and bullying masquerading as change plans at a major local university, first for administrators and then for academics. In 2011, I’d watched the rationale behind turning a multi-campus cross-regional university into a centralised one with a linear marketing strategy involving going online.

Much has been written on the battles against social sciences, languages and humanities; liberal, fine and educational arts, wrought by interest bodies within the wider institutions applying, misapplying, artificial, indeed invalid, measures that fail to capture the fineness and criticality of such forms of endeavour. They speak of *margins* and *viability*, numeral factors that may show a few years hence, yet we believe

education is a life-long process. No-one ever considers the impacts on learners and their learning processes when universities undergo multiple consecutive restructurings. Negotiations on behalf of areas such as my own always begin with a fight and with hope but end with despair. The clear message? Neither you, your life experience, your research-informed talent, your community engagement, nor your subject are relevant here in the modernised university. You lose us money.

I have to paint the story of my experience in an abstract way. The stories created by universities are never what they are made to appear; there is much spin, propaganda, false good news. But the stories of individuals heard and shared reveal the intrigues, manipulations, briberies, agendas and multiple forms of bullying that ultimately are silenced by contracts of redundancy.

Those overseeing change, restructurings, rebrandings, curriculum renewals, re-anythings, create opportunities for consultancy that are not heard, e-discussion boards that go unread, preacher-style meetings where critical debate has no possibility. They hire puppets with the good news agenda of helping people through change; but then those puppets report back to management, and suddenly you are faced in a meeting with a revelation given in confidence. Consultation is a pretence, a sham. If you dare to speak, let alone propound a point, you are 'vexatious'. True debate is shut down. Management's many *faits accomplis* offer no reply and even reject findings from independent internal reviews that don't accord with their agenda and line up with what has already been decided.

They create a bastard language that spoils perfectly good words, especially, 'leadership', now a psychopath's or a narcissist's term of self-aggrandisement that almost never does as it claims. You're not 'flexible' if you balk when your position is unsustainable, and you're not 'resilient' when you don't trust market forces to resituate yourself. There is no doubt that ruined universities target individuals like hunters lining up ducks for a kill and pretend it is random. This is not a natural Darwinian process where the slowest antelope becomes dinner. It is, in fact, a set of deliberate frame-ups. A number of heads must roll, so the torture instruments are rolled out, and the instruments of efficiency, accountability and transparency find ways to make excellent people appear mediocre and quality work appear unimportant. 'Toxic' doesn't cut it. This process of sustained alienation exemplifies the trajectory that leads people, such as myself, to take redundancy, and it is as far from voluntary as murder is from euthanasia.

3. David (49), Former Senior Academic (Lower-tier urban Australian university)

I had been a Senior Lecturer for many years when I applied the saying 'if you can't beat them, join them' and accepted

an invitation to become management. It had become clear, in this climate of change for change's sake, that the only way to ensure promotion and a degree of stability was by becoming management. Academic promotion processes virtually demanded management experience, regardless of your teaching record, acts of community engagement and your list of quality assured publications with 50 citations each according to Google Scholar. I went and joined them.

I attended in-house training sessions, ranging from the banal (running budgets, explaining the new travel policy) to the faintly inhuman (enacting student and staff discipline and complaint processes, keeping explicit audit and evidence trails). Sent as a manager to training on bullying policy (or did they call it anti-bullying?), I was taught how far you can push people before it's considered bullying. I was told to monitor, survey, watch, slow process down, record. I had access to data about how long people were signed into Outlook or the LMS [Learning Management System] and how long it took them to respond to internal emails. I was taught never to use 'dear' in emails; that continually cancelling meetings keeps people in their place. I had been effectively taught how to bully.

Before I 'joined' them I had watched the progress of peers, working their way up the ladder to higher ground and becoming favourites at the throne. I envied their ascension.

First, three co-workers had attained the rank of Associate Professor (AP) following their emigration to management. They now performance-managed former peers, and I now see that they had become privy to their aspirations and vulnerabilities. In time, they would use this knowledge, shared in deep confidence, against them. At the time of the interviews with their 'reports', they cast themselves as supportive, charting courses of appropriate professional development. I'd watch underlings flock around them.

Second, a prominent member of the union had become a high-level manager and was thriving. I viewed him as a case study. Could I have a career trajectory like his? Inwardly, I wondered how someone so 'left' could turn so 'right' and, as time went by, I came to wonder how he could live with himself. He had gone from fighting for the downtrodden to representing those I call 'the down-treaders'. This, too, had happened to the APs, and I wondered why it seemed true that, to cite Sir John Dalberg-Acton, 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. I kept an open mind; but realised that I had been invited to the dark side. In a nightmare recollection of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, I saw that a pod had been prepared for me; all I had to do was fall asleep.

At this point, as a trusted manager, I was given the authority to tell my 'reports' that there was to be a further redundancy round to accommodate a new, improved modular delivery model. Last year there had been a plea for dead wood to self-identify and take early retirement, or for those who had enjoyed long careers to heroically pass the baton. Early

retirement packages were available to those 55 years or above. There was an element of let the younger ones have a chance. This year there was no cut off point; it was open to all. *Attractive packages. Apply at your convenience.*

This announcement led to an atmosphere of toxicity. Corridor conversations suggested that some individuals were targeted and named as redundancy victims. I recalled my managerialist training: *how far you can push people before it's bullying?*, and also the vulnerabilities and areas for future learning that 'reports' (colleagues) had shared in confidence with performance managers. It became clear that the rumour mill was effectively coercing individuals to volunteer for redundancy by circulating people's vulnerabilities. Then I learned that my role was to go. It had been a glass cliff all along.

Bullying is insidious, and you often only realise you've been bullied only when you reflect; when you're living it, it feels like due process and you deserve it. I now see myself as suffering from a Stockholm Syndrome inside another Stockholm Syndrome. I was so captured and captivated by becoming management that I could not see that I was a hostage. To add insult to injury, we all received beautifully printed letters on high-grade paper telling us that our applications had been successful.

4. Marta (51), Academic (Mid-range Urban Australian university)

I was, for two decades, a lecturer at a mid-range urban university. There came a time when I was no longer an educator and educationalist; I had turned into a glorified administrator. Keeping marks was burden number one. I had to maintain assessment records in three forms: one on various LMS; another in an online institutional aggregator that 'talked to' the central system, and once on the designated Excel spreadsheet that had always been set up with the incorrect weightings, requiring repeat work. Moderation processes led to burden number two. For every internal assessment activity, I kept a paper trail of a pre-event moderation process; evidence of peer-level input into the assessment activity itself, and a detailed set of papers examining post-event moderation procedures, so that we could improve the assessment for the next delivery. This was called a culture of continual improvement; it felt like a culture of endless paperwork.

I could list many more burdens and try to excuse myself from not having time to generate research, grant applications, promotion applications, award applications or even to keep my CV up to date. I'm going to bullet-point some of the other irksome things that made me realise that I had lost my passion and my soul. From my perspective, it seemed that management...

- Changed the instruments of measurement of research

output and quality so stealthily, often and obscurely that it became impossible to follow.

- Surreptitiously created criteria to eliminate the research-work of some individuals from 'what counted' in terms of gaining credit towards conference travel and gaining points in the university's research activity measure without rationale or explanation.
- Generated multiple new and revised policies and principles, claimed they were openly available but ensured they were only accessible in the most inaccessible servers guarded by triple firewalls.
- Implemented the annual strategy of raising the minimum number of seat-bums that can make your class viable: 15, 17, 23, 30, infinity.
- Annually number-crunched your weekly fulltime teaching hours: 12, 17, 23, 27; declined your applications to attend a conference, even with a paper accepted, because your track record is not good enough.
- Regarded you with suspicion if you are a member of a SIG (Special Interest Group), a community of practice or a union and forced collective activity underground.
- Reminded you continually to stick to 'core' business, which you thought was teaching and learning, but investing in this function gets you nowhere.
- Told you year after year that no matter how high your learners achieved or how excellent your evaluations were, you were not ready for promotion. I had been a Lecturer B for 20 years.
- They insisted that you took your professional development in in-house sessions related to new and improved software necessary for managing lectures recording technology, recording and reporting student attendance, ensuring consistency of assessment processes, self-evaluation as a component of performance management, recording and evidencing expenses and travel claims, learning what is different in the latest versions of Word, Excel and Outlook. I craved the opportunity to develop my thinking and pedagogy in my own area.

When I heard that another redundancy round was imminent, I realised that this is what I had to do. It was time to end it all.

5. Mira (57), Former Academic (Urban Australian and UK universities)

I entered university life in 1992 as a junior, blissful to have been granted entry into the academic community. For the next decade, university life was good. Teaching workloads and class sizes were designed for the benefit of students and staff; research allocation was inclusive and more-or-less equally distributed; progression through the ranks was transparent, and departments were collegial.

But now, 28 years later, I despair at what being an academic entails and at the state of the 'Academy'. I have left, via VR, early, without the benefit of being financially secure into old age. I left early, mourning for a part of my life I had loved.

Did I tire due to my age, simply bored with a profession that no longer carried the challenges I embraced as a neophyte? No. I left early in a state of despair because the job of an academic bears no resemblance to the one I entered. Granted, all jobs change over time. But over the last decade or so the work and work conditions within universities have become so increasingly degraded that the job of being an academic is barely recognisable. I can say universities in the plural, since I've worked at seven universities including three in xxxx and four in yyyy. I kept leaving one university for another, thinking the issues I was observing and experiencing were located in each individual institution I had chosen.

On reflection, there is one clear theme: *The Commodification of Education*. The rhetoric within government and university management revolves around the language of students as consumers. Students are seen as customers and higher education institutions as 'education product' providers. Universities are part of an economic supply chain geared not to encourage the flourishing and production of an educated, well-rounded society, but to advance the interests of industry. The neoliberal agenda rears its foul head. It is against this background that problems emerge.

Since a failed student is not a satisfied customer, especially a foreign failed student paying full fees, how and why students are awarded marks becomes an issue. I strongly feel that the covert downward slide of what once were considered acceptable university-level submissions render academics mere stooges in the awarding of degrees. The discretion of academics to award marks according to the true quality of work and evidence of a student's critical knowledge acquisition has been eroded.

The management-espoused emphasis on 'the student experience' is a farce. Now following a business model, universities are competing for students while (stupidly) being in cost reduction mode. Student classes are ever-expanding while universities are cutting staff, resources, career progression opportunities, and salaries. The squeeze on staff is at odds with the production of a conducive environment in which 'customer service' can be provided. Academics are bearing the brunt of such shit poor management. Stress levels are soaring; burnout is rampant. University management responds by having 'Staff Wellness Days' where nothing actually happens to fix the toxic level of work intensification.

Universities are also in the game of reducing the time allocated for research activity. Research is now largely something academics are expected to do in their own time, since the week time is for the provision of continuous quality 'customer service'. It is not enough to research (on

weekends) and to publish in credible journals. We must now publish in journals deemed to be prestigious by external bodies. Anything less is a waste of time. Further, many of the 'prestigious' journals are a closed shop, where members of the editorial boards publish each other's work.

The saddest thing is that academic departments are no longer collegial. Academics now work behind closed office doors (unless they've been shunted into an open office setting), they are pitted against each other for the scarce resources of research time, sabbaticals, conference allowances and promotion. Collegiality is nearly completely dead.

As academics, our hard work spent in accumulating the knowledge of our discipline is no longer regarded as of value. Our 'knowledge labour' has been replaced by the emotional labour characteristic of basic customer service environments. It is an altogether different burden.

And so, I have fled. I mourn having felt the need to flee. I mourn my dead profession. I mourn the loss of what I once regarded as my true vocation and purpose, and I mourn my loss of identity. But even though I have fled and am in mourning, I know that what I have done is the right thing for me.

6. Helena (52), Senior Academic (*Multiple urban and suburban Australian universities*)

The same year I was promoted to professor, I accepted a voluntary redundancy package. While I admit I had personal push factors, the push factors were extraordinary, exemplifying managerialism gone feral.

At the heart of the issue was tall poppy syndrome. I was a highly published author, in demand as a plenary speaker, and I had accepted a job at a low-ranked university whose research culture needed a shake-up. However, my body of work was deemed to be too radical and grounded in wicked problem-solving. Although in my interview it was a given that I would sit on, or even chair, the faculty research committee, I was ultimately not given a place and had to fight to get one. The battle for inclusion had begun. It was clear that I was a threat both in terms of the rigour of my work and its implications. It was clear that they had hired an activist, and a person who fought for her own rights and those of others. My short tenure is a sad tale of how they tried to rectify their error of judgement.

It quickly became apparent that the job I accepted was not the job I got. Researcher development was to have been my job and my core reason for accepting the position, but a restructure saw that plan scuttled and the faculty divided into so-called Discipline Groups, which turned out more to be about conveying information about processes and administrivia, about *change propagandising*, than about researcher or professional development of any kind. These groups were not special interest groups or communities of

practice; they were Discipline Groups (capitals intended). The emphasis on 'discipline' was not lost on those of us with a Foucauldian bent.

Despite the managerialist agenda, our group elected to become a critical discussion group, critiquing real issues in our overlapping disciplines. However, within the group were spies, powerful because they had the ear of the powerful. Members of the group were constantly rejected for personal and study leave, conferences, opportunities to submit grants and promotions. Their research outputs were recoded to seem aligned with different groups, and no credits were given to the researchers as a result. The theses they supervised to completion were also coded to appear as if they had been the fruit of another group. These strategies of theft turned out to be just two of many ploys to render active researchers research inactive. It seemed to the group that they had become a target. During the next year's restructuring, the number of groups was reduced and mine eliminated. I felt like the victim of a toxic McCarthyist witch-hunt. Self-care was needed.

I took a year of absence to work on research and extended the time away with multiple conferences. This was immeasurably valuable, and set me in a safe place for my return, when I, together with my colleagues, faced voluntary redundancy. Resuming our community of practice 'illegally' and 'underground', my group of scholars planned conferences and outputs about their experiences of being bullied in multiple ways due to their perceived political alignment as Communists. Instead of writing war stories, they chose to produce stories of hope and resistance.

My fatal flaw was my trust in democracy. Comments in an email addressed to and intended for the group were leaked to management leading to disciplinary action against me, forcing me into a vexatious and stacked kangaroo court. It was a strategy to wear me down. My email history was seized, and I was tried as a witch. Many of my colleagues had decided on redundancy, some with an ironic 'take the money and run' approach, but, at the time of my writing this, few of them have recovered their careers because they were disenfranchised and disillusioned. A stolen generation. It was their collective despair that led me to know that the only dignified ending was voluntary redundancy, though deep down I feared that this meant that they had won. The lunatics had finally claimed the asylum.

Data analysis as discussion

I presented the six stories as narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) so that the stories could speak to the reader for themselves in light of my introductory material. Stories, Polkinghorne maintained, pull varieties of events and actions that occur in human lives into thematic patterns and narratives. Yet the demands of writing a discussion

necessitate analysis of narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995); that is, to pull out the themes signalled in the early parts of the article. As Ryan and Bernard (2003, p.88) state, 'themes come both from the data (an inductive approach) and from the investigator's prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study (an *a priori* approach)'. My trust in the reader assumes the *a priori* approach. This approach is appropriate because each story has a different main writer, from the business-like Marta to the metaphorical Helena, and different strategies are used to narrate still-painful topics, as in David's conscious lacuna (...), Marta's bullets or Carl's abstraction. Thus, by making narrators' thought processes explicit, I 'think narratively' about the phenomenon, namely 'voluntary' redundancy (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) and the factors underpinning it.

Themes come from acts of readerly scrutiny. I present just six stories so the constant comparison or cutting/sorting methods hardly fit. My scrutiny lies in actions applicable to narrative: seeking repetitions and echoes in key words and concepts, attributing meaning to narrative devices, considering connotations or what meanings lie behind the surface (analogy or allegory) and finding recurrent metaphors. In relation to the latter, Helena spoke of her participants not wanting to write 'war stories', but to write in the Freirean spirit of hope; but what I have here are narratives of war, and Helena's story uses cold war metaphors and speaks of battles, underground movements, spies and managerialism's propagandist tactics, while Diana speaks of 'colleagues in arms' and 'swords' as images of old school valour. Imagery of being disciplined and punished (David, Marta, Helena) and hunted (Carl, Helena; David is 'captured') is aligned, as is Mira's image of academics being forced behind closed doors.

The metaphor of espial, war and hiding infuses these narratives, and functions to speak to the tenets of temporality, sociality and locality that Clandinin (2013) said mark narrative enquiry. The term 'resistance' (Helena) not only connotes activism, but also those who helped the victimised during World War 2. The theme of residual powerlessness can be inferred from the absence of resistance in other narratives as resistance is a form of empowerment. Instead, they all enact inevitable downward spirals with the narrator as a victim of the managerialist traps Vaillancourt (2020) details, including accidentally circulating emails (Helena) or other personal information (Carl); pushing people over glass cliffs (Diana, David, Helena), sowing seeds of doubt (all narratives) and slow micromanagement (Marta). Diana even writes that she is the put-upon protagonist in the archetypal hero's journey narrative, while David's experience evokes a political horror allegory where the genuine are replaced by the neoliberalised. Powerlessness is omnipresent: 'Underlings' surround the powerful (David); academics become 'stooges' (Mira).

We see fresh critique of how new managerialism works only in Carl's narrative; what we see instead is a sense of the horrific opportunities it offers those in power to skewer the powerlessness, and the loss of humanity and collegiality involved (all narratives), in the case of Diana, because they have all been picked off one by one leaving no-one except bastard leadership. It is not neoliberalism that dehumanises, but rather the corrupted individuals who uphold it. References to criminality appear but, 'theft' aside (Helena), the crimes are seldom named, perhaps because they are symbolic violence of invisible and impenetrable cast; perhaps because the fear of being accused of libel hangs over everyone, or perhaps because they have all, after all, signed final agreements at the point of accepting 'voluntary' redundancy (Carl). Words shared in confidence become gossip and weaponry (Carl, David, Helena); collegiality dies (Diana, David, Mira) or is forced underground (Helena). It is not the ideology but the people, the 'shit poor management' (Mira) who bastardise and suborn the term 'leadership' (Carl) who are the villains. Marta goes as far as to bullet-point their 'crimes.' The motif of madness recurs (Mira, Helena), arguably as a strategy to try to understand the obscene (Carl). Hence, so, too, does the theme of appearance versus reality, epitomised by Carl's description of managerialism's tactic to make 'excellent people appear mediocre and quality work appear unimportant'.

In seeking repetitions, we see recurrent words including 'despair' (Carl, Mira, Helena) or Diana's 'travail', 'toxic' (Carl, David, Mira, Helena) and 'vexatious' (Carl, David, Helena). References to degradation and death are pervasive (David, Marta, Mira) including the death of passion (Diana, Marta). Carl takes to violent images of decapitation and murder. The narratives appear on the brink of punning on 'discipline' until Helena finally goes there.

Dominant themes include the furtive forms that bullying takes (all stories); the absence of transparent or fair change management strategies in universities (all stories); loss of value/identity (Diana, Carl, Marta, Mira) and the deceitful tactics of that faceless, nameless but all powerful entity, 'management', often named simply as 'they' (all stories). Common narratives include barriers to promotion (Marta, Mira) or the poisoned chalice that comes with it (Diana, David, Helena); the tedium of in-house training as substitutes for genuine professional learning (Diana, David, Marta) and the slow death by Excel (Marta).

There are four stories that include the theme of jobs changing: Diana's rewritten person specification wrote her out; David found that becoming management compromised his moral compass; Marta lamented her admin load prevented her from attaining a rewarding academic identity; Mira detailed how the work of an academic simply is not the passion job it once was; Helena found the work she was given radically differed from what had been promised. Numbers are another

source of anxiety: a change from true quality to the quality as something quantifiable sets the background for the narratives. Commodification is seen as the root of evils; for instance, academics are made to pass unworthy students because they are customers (Mira). Similarly, evaluations are meaningless as a measure of an individual's contribution and quality (Diana, Carl, Marta, Mira). As for voluntary redundancy, the six survivors detail narratives of exit. In all cases, the job ceased to be viable or bearable. The four clearest themes are: sense of injustice; perception of fraud/deceit; loss of identity, glass cliffs and bullying/scapegoating.

Conclusion

The main reason this study exists is to record and include the occluded voices and perspectives of academics who took voluntary redundancies in the late 2010s and early 2020s in case this is important to history. Further, it provides lived narrative data to support the autoethnographies of Joseph (2015) and Watson (2011) and leaves little doubt that injustice, theft, fraud, bullying and scapegoating are instruments of neoliberalism in times of change. The absence of strategic management, so vital to the success of VR (Clarke, 2007), cries out from the stories. We also have seen that the official story of technically legal voluntariness belies lived stories of micromanaged coercion, structured unfairness and inequity, unmanaged toxicity, policed entrapment via technologies of surveillance and suborning the mechanisms of audit to create convenient truths (actual falsehoods) that cast apparently targeted individuals unfavourably in relation to non-targeted individuals. People are made to act as willed (Pink, 2016); they are not volunteers.

As to the '*so what* and *who cares?*' (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p.52), there are some who mock the experiences of overprivileged academics. The *so what?* is simply that life goes on as Barcan (2013; 2019), Rustin (2016), Bottrell and Manathunga (2019) and others have shown. What is done cannot be undone. But it is also historically and morally instructive about what happens to human beings forced into unnaturally individualised hyper-competitiveness over community-oriented cooperation and collaboration, a theme of topicality in the wake of COVID-19 where kindness has become a political principle. This article preaches to the converted: those interested are likely to see themselves or their peers in my mirror. There may be resonance. This is a *so what?* Such readers care, and hopefully, so too, will scholars in the future, retrospectively understanding the historical moment like Nuremberg judges re-evaluating war crimes.

The study also reveals details of the toxic and vexatious behaviours that bureaucratic organisation allows and fosters (Smythe, 2017; Vaillancourt, 2020). The experienced truth of the accidental, irrational, emotional and socio-political

factors Weber (1915/1949) valued is discovered; another *so what?* I have used Weber to create a methodological analogy: my descriptive historical metanarrative as a means of showing the ribs of the skeleton, the truth behind the master-narrative/official/corporate story. I acknowledge Weber, too, (1946, cited by Hooghe, 2011, p.40) in my final quote: 'bureaucratic organisation has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organisation'. It is easy to point the finger at an ideology, but far harder to name its abusers.

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