Zoomed – A personal reflection on the long, slow destruction of Australia's university system

Louise Johnson

After 40 years as a hardworking and productive academic, here I was on a Zoom call fronting two senior colleagues telling me I no longer appeared on the new 'organisational chart'. In short, I was being made redundant. It was no surprise really, as another 40,000 professional and academic staff were to suffer the same fate. And really by then I was over what university life had become: stressed, thankless, driven by meaningless metrics and bereft of social values. But how did we get to this and was COVID-19 but a ruse, a smokescreen for an acceleration of the processes of politicisation, corporatisation, marketisation and casualisation which had brought my beloved system to its knees. Here then is a personal/political reflection on what has occurred in Australian universities over the last few decades – their long slow agonising destruction.

Keywords: Australian universities; Covid-19; politicisation; corporatisation; marketisation; casualisation

The day was crisp and cold, but as usual, there was a lockdown routine: rise after the daily dose of Radio National, breakfast and then the long coffee walk.

It was 8.30 when the Zoom invite came through. Time to meet the dean and head of school – 9.30. One hour to prepare for one of the biggest conversations ever. What to do? Check emails of course, see how the students are faring. Wonder if the trade union should be involved. Eventually decide that this would be wise and sent off a 'help' email at 8.45 which a week later still has not been answered. And so there they were, their faces floating on the screen: she reading like a robot from a prepared script – the better not to stuff up the process or let any emotion or humanity show; he to answer short questions with short answers – yes geography would stay but it would be smaller ... and sure, an honorary position could be done ... And then, of course, there are the counselling services...

The situation was 'serious'. COVID-19 had created a real problem for the university and the Vice Chancellor had decided to handle it by being 'strategic' which meant there was a new 'operational plan' and a set of 'principles'... (T)hen a statement that in the new faculty plan, there was a matching of people to positions and my name was not on the plan. And that was it. I was officially invisible, cast from the plan, the place, the citadel of knowledge to which I had devoted over half my life. This after 40 years. It is a personal loss – of face, of salary, of purpose, of esteem, of place. But it is also an institutional loss ... of deep knowledge, of a great deal of experience, of living the history of a university where my first job was to 'build a bachelor of arts' and then create whole new areas of study – Australian Studies, Women's Studies, Cultural Studies, Asian Studies – and do ground-breaking thinking ... which has changed the way the discipline, a host of students and at least some

of the world now thinks about and plans cities. But clearly this is not noteworthy or deserving of any acknowledgement.

We are now in the 'consultation' phase so I can argue against the need for my discipline no longer to need any leadership – as the position, not just me, has to be rationalised out of existence.

Excerpt from the 'Redundancy Diary', 2 June 2020.

Nearly two years on, the system which declared me redundant continues to suffer. Today it is news that six Australian Research Council (ARC) grants in the humanities have been vetoed by the Acting Minister because they 'do not demonstrate value for taxpayer's money nor contribute to the national interest' (Lamond, 2022). This after endless internal and external reviews and assessments, including of nebulous nation-building contribution. A few months ago, it was that after extensive 'feedback' and 'suggestions' for improvement, the Deakin University vice-chancellor who had overseen the previous exodus of 600 full time staff and thousands of casuals, was about to 'reimagine' the university again, this time with 400 fewer staff and a whole new configuration of professional areas.

The details of each institutional response to the financial 'crisis' precipitated by COVID-19 matters of course, but it is part of a much larger agenda which can only mean the long, slow killing of our precious university system. This has been a much predicted and documented phenomenon, eloquently described earlier by Ian Lowe (1994), Bill Readings (1996), John Biggs and Richard Davis (2002), Richard Hil (2012), Hannah Forsyth (2017) and Raewyn Connell (2019).

So, the despair is nothing new and it does not cancel out the many positive developments that have occurred in Australian higher education. There has been a laudable expansion of the system, as year 12 completion rates have soared from 46 per cent in 1985 to 78 per cent in 2010 along with the numbers of students. From a mere 3,000 elite members of the newly formed nation in 1911 attending one of the six state capital-based institutions, there was an expansion to 31,750 more technologically and scientifically attuned graduates at the end of World War II. As the long boom began and government support grew for a new generation of outer suburban and regional universities, numbers grew to 151,000 students at the end of the swinging 1960s, surged again to 230,000 in 1989 and thence to over a million in 2019, contributing to the much vaunted 'clever country' (Forsyth, 2017; Universities Australia, 2019). There have been new principles of equity, inclusion and openness along with innovative technologies that have allowed many to attend university who were previously unable to do so because of income, location, disability, family or work commitments. Dedicated centres and scholarships also supported the growth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation while international education has grown to become the nation's third largest income earner and support a more globalised curriculum.

But, in the chaos engendered by COVID-19 there has been a loss not only of this international student income but of around 35,000 ongoing staff along with an estimated 100,000 casual staff by September 2021 (Darwin, 2020; Marshman & Larkins, 2021; Universities Australia, 2021). This may not seem too many out of a combined workforce of 130,000 full time equivalent (FTE) staff (DESE, 2020a). However, one analysis of these latest convulsions showed that staff losses – in the order of ten per cent across the system – were disproportionate to the overall financial loss of around five per cent, with the difference made up by smart investments, deferred expenditure, bigger domestic enrolments, higher income from fees and charges and a one-off government grant of $1 billion for research (Marshman & Larkins, 2021). In short, the staff cuts were well beyond what was necessitated by the supposed income crisis. So, what else is going on in our universities and why would a highly productive, tenured female geography professor and many, many others, be made redundant when there really was no need?

The situation was 'serious'. COVID-19 had created a real problem ... in the new faculty plan, there was a matching of people to positions and my name was not on the plan. And that was it (Excerpt Redundancy Diary, 2020).

The implications of such staff cuts go well beyond the fate of one person and involve the loss of highly qualified and experienced teachers and researchers in areas that all contribute to the national good, be it in the sciences, health, business or the arts. But it comes at the end of two decades of 'reform' which means that the post-pandemic Australian university will join the ranks of other high tech, on demand, casualised operations, with an Uberised labour force producing narrowly trained students and research tailored to the immediate needs of industry and a few economically useful national priorities. The country and its citizenry will be all the poorer for it. My argument is that such losses derive from the trends that came together to see me Zoomed on that cold June morning: a politicisation and corporatisation of the academy, its capture by the rhetoric and reality of marketisation, a related epidemic of casualisation and a concerted ideological assault on the arts and academic freedom.

From government oversight to politicisation and control

The model adopted in the mid-19th century from England, Ireland and Scotland for Australian universities was of a self-governing autonomous system with independent institutions. But from the time of their inception, governments have played key roles, primarily via direct funding but also through endless reviews (including Murray, 1957; Martin, 1965, Dawkins

White Paper, 1988; West 1998; Nelson 2002; Bradley, 2007; Lomax-Smith 2011; Kemp-Norton 2014), quality assurance mechanisms and national policy priorities. All these actions by government have shaped individual institutions, their internal operation, staff priorities, research and teaching agendas as well as administrative systems. Many are understandable and perfectly reasonable, but the more recent shift from oversight to politicisation and control is one that threatens institutional and individual freedom at a time when it is needed most.

Over the 20th century there were shifts in priorities related to the demands of war and the economy. Thus, during World War I, the original elite and merit-based student body was broadened to include returned soldiers while research was linked to the needs of the military. After World War II, the New South Wales University of Technology (later UNSW) and Melbourne Technical College (later RMIT) were established to focus research and teaching on technological and applied areas of study. During the Cold War, the Murray Report (1957) aligned the system to Prime Minister Menzies' prevailing national priorities – academic freedom to protect democracy and federal funding to support a dual system of high-level enquiry and professional education within universities and separate technical training in colleges of advanced education (CAEs) (Forsyth, 2017). Here then were national political and educational priorities etched onto the tertiary education system.

But as we moved into the latter part of the 20th century, governments assumed a more direct role in university functioning. A key mechanism was the 'quality' agenda: realised through managers and bureaucratic processes, external accountability against standardised measures and an extension of quality measures from teaching to research and thence to institutional comparisons, nationally and internationally.

Emerging from the management of factories after World War II, Quality Assurance (QA) was imported into universities in the 1980s and over the 1990s performance was increasingly linked to funding. By 1995 each institution had to compile an annual educational profile complete with a quality improvement plan within a standardised Australian Qualifications Framework. This in turn was used by government to evaluate performance and negotiate triennial funding. By 2000 this role was transferred to the Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA) to oversee five yearly audits and monitor university compliance, performance

and quality standards. There has also been an extension of anxieties over 'quality' from teaching and curriculum to research, with the introduction of the Excellence in Research (ERA) agenda from 2010.

While no one would dispute the need for 'quality' within the academy, it is not clear if there was a quality problem which needed to be fixed. Perhaps the problem was proving it, beyond the obvious esteem universities enjoyed and the rigour with which they appointed staff, accredited courses and assessed students and the peer review system which ensured high quality research. Without a doubt, many, many hours of valuable academic and professional staff time are now devoted to ensuring 'compliance' and generating the policies, processes, statistics, surveys and documentation required for the various audits, reviews and reports now demanded internally and by government. All of this is done via ever-present metrics. Measurement is king and reputations of individuals, departments and whole universities stand or fall – or so is the fear – based on a good report by AUQA or in the ERA, reports by students of teaching quality, graduates of their destinations and, most feared of all, international agencies comparing institutions across the globe. All universities now extol their own excellence and quality along with their rankings in any or all of the various national or international league tables. It is a zero-sum game as each individual struggles to meet the ever-rising expectations, institutes and departments – the ever-growing performance targets, and universities – a higher prized place on one or other league table.

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In a way none of this 'busyness' would matter – beyond the opportunity costs of devoting so much time and effort to measurement – if it was really about teaching quality or generating innovative and community enhancing research. But it is not. It has become primarily about process, quantification of simple performance measures and their use to rank individuals and their various collectives to thereby drive the choices of individual academics – to pass or fail a student, to appoint one staff member over another, to pursue one research project or publication outlet compared to the other. In short, such measures are a threat to academic freedom, the fearless pursuit of truth, ground-breaking and socially important research and honest assessment.

I can recall as each summer 'break' approached the decision to either spend the time working with colleagues on a grant application (preferably the holy grail of the ARC Discovery, (success rate 19 per cent) (ARC, 2022), along with the risk of

government veto) or writing a publication or two, the decision based on how I was tracking against the latest metric of my 'performance'. Had I generated enough points in my Workload Allocation Model (WAM) via income, publications and graduate student completions to ensure that I was 'research active' and therefore not to be punished next teaching semester with more students? But maybe the best research project was one with a community group to enhance well-being, the most urgent writing task an evaluation of a local policy initiative, the greatest need to update teaching materials. All these were not to be counted and were therefore discouraged. In short, the WAM was driving increased productivity in certain directions to meet politically set priorities: for national and international educational reputation against externally set metrics.

So, interfering in the ARC and setting national priorities for research is not new, but what is, is the singling out of individuals, the narrowness of the agenda and a devaluing of those fields which don't look relevant through the politicisation of scarce funding.

There has also been the long-term withdrawal of government funding for universities. Thus, despite the growth in absolute dollar allocations, the level of funding has declined since the dizzy heights of the 1990s when it stood at 60 per cent of university income, to be 40 per cent in 2008 (Shah, Nair & Wilson, 2011). There was also the infamous decision at the height of the pandemic, as new international student arrivals were blocked and others were told to return to their home countries, to rule universities out from accessing the support offered to other businesses. Denying public institutions access to funding from the Government's JobKeeper scheme meant that the full force of income loss was to be weathered by each institution in its own way. And the easiest way was of course to sack staff, which they did in their thousands.

The earlier fall in federal funding had been countered by the rise in international student enrolments – from 35,290 in 1994 to 442,219 in 2019 (DESE, 2020b) – and the desperate search for fee paying programs, the quest for non-government funding for research and the development of the university as an entrepreneurial incubator: in short a move to become more like a corporation than a teaching and research organisation.

Corporatisation

The Dawkins reforms of 1988 created the Unified National System, as CAEs and other colleges were merged into universities. Apart from the sheer agony and disruption this created for many of those managing and living the change, the institutions which emerged were very much larger than their predecessors. And in the neo-liberal climate, they were also to be run differently, moving decisively away from collegial governance and peer review, to externally mediated quality

assurance mechanisms and an explosion in the number, salaries and power of university managers. These managers were now tasked with finding new ways of paying for the expansion in students and research output and filling the gaps left by the funding cuts that were to follow.

The 1960s and 1970s had witnessed not only an expansion of free university education but its internal democratisation and radicalisation with the rise of the Free University, the critique of existing knowledge orthodoxies, the election of middle managers and the replacement of professorial boards by elected academic boards. The 1980s saw an assault on all these initiatives (Connell, 2016). As institutions became larger and more market oriented, there was a centralisation of power in a managerial elite. The scholar dean was replaced by the manager dean (Shattock, 2014) while Forsyth charts the related 'pro-vice-chancellor (PVC) epidemic' (Forsyth, 2017, p. 227) as senior, expensive managers were recruited by executive search agencies to oversee elaborate processes, large staff cohorts and gigantic budgets in teaching, research, people and culture, marketing, internationalisation, student services. Their bloated divisions in turn were divided into smaller areas for lesser but still well-paid managers – with student services needing separate overseers to look after recruitment, enrolment, progression, housing, graduations and employment. This concentration of power and resources into vast professional areas – now comprising over 62 per cent of university staff – and managers, creates a hierarchical and divisional model drawn effectively from the corporate world. Their pursuit is also one of income, even profit, over all other imperatives.

And so there they were. She reading like a robot from a prepared script – the better not to stuff up the process – he to answer short questions with short answers (Excerpt from Redundancy Diary, 2020)

Marketisation

The neo-liberal ascendancy from the 1980s saw the Hawke Government urge universities to become more entrepreneurial by commercialising research and allowing 'the market' to adjudicate. The federal government also encouraged the establishment of several private tertiary institutions – Bond, Melbourne Business School, Notre Dame and Melbourne University Private.

The neo-liberal argument was that higher education primarily produced a private benefit – graduates usually had higher starting salaries than non-graduates and entered closely guarded professions whose income levels usually exceeded those outside. In this new formulation, higher education was no longer a social good but was a product to be sold, an asset that individuals benefited from and therefore should pay for. While Gough Whitlam had famously abolished fees in

1972, the new agenda meant that higher education was now a commodity. To pay for it, the federal government adopted an income-contingent loan scheme.

This change in the meaning and obvious cost of higher education had far reaching consequences. In a deft sleight of hand, universities were redefined from institutions that were fundamental to a civilised society to shops that sold a self-indulgent commodity which students had to pay for (Biggs & Davis, 2002).

The effective re-introduction of tertiary fees has led to many generations of students who graduate with huge levels of debt. In 2019-2020, the average was $23,685 with an overall national encumbrance of $66.4 billion, taking on average 9.3 years to pay back! (Parliament of Australia, 2019-2020). My own children have debts ranging from $24,000 to $42,000 while the partner of one of them, who pursued a law career, now owes the federal government more than $100,000. These are all young people in their 20s and early 30s, who desperately want to enter the housing market and start families while also pursuing careers. Their level of debt, while seemingly invisible and of no concern at the time of degree choice, is now a serious limit to their futures.

As customers, the relationship between student and academic staff has changed consequently. Students have been known to challenge grades on the basis that they are clients and owed a good result, academics have been pressured to keep pass rates high so as not to lose valuable fee income, while the attractiveness of a subject may well be boosted by unchallenging content and assessment. The quest for popular fee-paying courses directs attention away from challenging academic content towards skills and competencies.

Those subjects and courses that do not generate the right number of students to pay their way may well be discontinued, regardless of their social or academic value. For example, the latest round of COVID-justified cuts over 2021 has seen sociology removed from Curtin University in Perth, the whole Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney decimated, Chinese and Indonesian languages closed at Deakin University and human geography severely trimmed at the University of Melbourne. There will undoubtedly be far more closures of disciplines and departments as the cuts roll on. It is important to consider just how much arts and the social sciences are being singled out in this exercise, as government payment structures change to disadvantage them – as 'Society and Culture' moves from Band 2 costing $6,904 per subject to Band 4 costing $14,500 from January 1, 2021 (Australian Government, 2020). Once 'the market' starts to drive the offerings of universities, then decisions are made solely on numbers: student popularity, some notion of 'employability' or alignment with national priorities – for mining engineers, statisticians, nurses, teachers and clinical psychologists rather than environmental managers, lawyers, accountants or those in the creative arts.

Finally, the market imperative now driving so much of what universities do means that they have been designated incubators of economic growth, particularly in regional areas. Increasingly universities are urged to seek research and other funding from the private sector and industry – for professorial positions, for applied research, even curriculum initiatives such as those in Western civilisation sponsored by the Ramsay Foundation. Engineering at Deakin University, slated for closure in the 1980s, was revived and transformed into a highly applied operation, fostering business start-ups, with industry working with university students, staff and graduates in applied research, commercial opportunities and product development, all on the Geelong Waurn Ponds campus. There are many other examples within this university and all others. Thus, with a Federal government agenda that starves universities of core funding and directs them to align with industry, commercialisation and their localities, university growth will come via partnerships and science parks (Gunasekara, 2004). The proportion of academic staff in these new enterprises who are 'tenured' is falling, as casualisation sweeps across the system, further compromising academic freedom.

Casualisation

Before the COVID-related staffing cuts hit, there had been a number of high-profile cases of 'wage theft' brought by individual workers in universities. Dragged before the Fair Work Commission here were cases in which casual academics had been underpaid for teaching and marking work. Such cases were usually dismissed by the sector as one offs, but as their numbers mounted and as staffing cuts grew, the sheer scale of casualisation was laid bare. Estimates vary but upwards of 60 per cent of academics were employed on a contractual or sessional basis in 2020, up from 20 per cent in the 1990s. Up to 80 per cent of some courses are taught by a casual academic (Wardale, Richardson & Suseno, 2019). By October 2021, 21 universities were under investigation by the Fair Work Commission. It is, as Damien Cahill (2021) wrote in the *Australian Financial Review*, the universities' 'dirty little secret'. It is a model of exploitative labour relations which creates an insecure, overworked, female dominated, income starved workforce without a career structure. It is a workforce which cannot offer the depth of knowledge and fearless pursuit of truth that has been the cornerstone of the tenured academic system. This is a further threat to academic freedom, for once your job or pay rate depends on the whim of a manager or even the mood of an administrator, then your vulnerability is clear (Evans & Stone, 2021). It is akin to the piece rates that typified 19th century sweated clothing

production, as marking or lecturing is paid by the task rather than the time taken to do the job (Hare, 2021).

The relationship possible between tenured staff member and student is no longer possible. The dedicated teacher, who works six days a week, answers emails at all hours, spends far more than the allotted one hour per 4,000 words on a piece of assessment, is in the office when you come to visit and who deeply knows and cares about their subject and your understanding of it, cannot be afforded or countenanced in the new system.

One hour to prepare for one of the biggest conversations ever. What to do? Check emails of course, see how the students are faring. (Excerpt from Redundancy Diary, 2020)

There had been numerous assaults on – or reviews of – tenure, long presented by university managers as inhibiting 'flexibility' despite the remarkable stability of enrolment trends and the deft manipulation of internal load and funding by senior managers to create surplus or famine at any desired point across their institutions. But such reviews are no longer necessary, tenure has been destroyed by stealth.

Assault on the arts

The trends described above – of increased government politicisation, marketisation and corporatisation along with the erosion of tenure and the explosion of casualisation – mean that Australia's universities are undergoing what Symes and colleagues call 'vocationalisation' as they become institutions whose main goal is economic, serving the labour needs of emerging industries. They do not see this as a problem but inevitable, with the consequence being that disciplines like sociology and history are basically assimilated into applied areas of study (Symes *et al.*, 2000). I must disagree and raise three points about the value of the arts:

1. We live in a society and culture, not only a world ruled by technology and economics. To understand and contribute to this world, we have to know where it has come from, how it operates and to be able to create and enjoy all that humanity can offer. For this you need the arts.
2. While it seems that the future is to be shaped primarily by science and technology, these elements do not exist and cannot be utilised in isolation from the human and social sciences.

What the COVID-19 pandemic has taught all who have chosen to look, is that the health sciences – be they medicine, nursing, epidemiology or virology – were not enough to understand how this virus emerged (for this we need environmental scientists and ecologists), spread into different cohorts and regions (for which we needed the expertise of sociologists and urban geographers) and was managed effectively by public health measures and vaccinations (here we needed psychologists, anthropologists, communication and media experts) while getting us all through the various government responses needed a very large injection of culture.

3. Finally, the humanities and social sciences solve real problems which cannot be apprehended let alone addressed via the sciences and technologies alone. Social inequality, housing market failures, the future of work and the emergence and management of new viruses all require a broad range of academic approaches to solve.

But what we have seen over the last decade has been a systematic attack on these areas of study, through their demonisation as producing worthless graduates who do not get jobs – though the employability rates of arts graduates is far higher than that of those with a science degree – a differentiation of government funding rates to systematically privilege those students who do a narrow range of subjects and professional degrees and finally the ignoring of the plight of universities before COVID and policies to force their greater reliance on external, industry funding for their survival.

In her thoughtful history of the Australian university system, Hannah Forsyth concluded:

…more rules, paperwork, administration and a PVC epidemic (is) poisoning and corrupting the authentic, passionate pursuit of knowledge and learning. The university system is left with wasteful research funding schemes, overpaid senior executives and 'star' researchers, with DVCs employed to improve 'quality' via QA systems that take academics away from teaching and research into endless meetings and form filling while their casual colleagues struggle to scrape by…all this creates a world that teaches everyone from the top to bottom to play the system rather than focus on the actual quality of teaching and research (Forsyth, 2017, p. 227).

To her analysis it is necessary to add the politicisation of the academy and the ideological attack on the humanities and social sciences which has been fully exposed and progressed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The personal cost to me of redundancy has not been overly great – I was over the horrors of an increasingly corrupted system – but the cost to our nation of the trends I have described is immeasurable and must be reversed.

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