

# The knowledge economy and university workers

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This article is a condensed analysis of the developing sustainability crisis of Australian universities. It is based on an address to National Council of the National Tertiary Education Union, Melbourne, 3 October 2014. Thanks to all my fellow-members, who have kept my hopes for the modern university alive.

## The collective intellectual

The modern idea of the intellectual crystallised at the end of the nineteenth century, in dramatic circumstances. Captain Dreyfus, a French army officer of Jewish background, had been framed by right-wing officers in an espionage case, and condemned by a biased military court to prison on Devil's Island. When evidence clearing Dreyfus came to light, the army refused to budge. The injustice was denounced by a group of writers, most famously Émile Zola, triggering a political struggle that ran for years. The term 'intellectuel' was stuck on Zola and his friends by violently abusive right-wing commentators – the ancestors of Murdoch's bloggers and columnists. Paradoxically it became a term of pride.

The image of the intellectual created in that moment still has some vitality: a creative, radical individual who 'speaks truth to power', who thinks publicly about large issues of society, justice or survival. Projecting forward, we think of Chomsky, Sartre or Solzhenitsyn; projecting backward, we think of Galileo, Marx or Tolstoy.

That's not a bad heritage to have. But it has its limits, quite apart from the health risks of chain-smoking Gauloises in Left Bank cafés. Most of the creative individuals who fit this bill seem to be urban, middle-class White blokes resident in Paris or, more recently, Boston. Uncomfortably

close to the profile of social privilege; if not members of the one per cent, then at least their cousins.

Exactly this point was made by another group of thinkers, beginning in late 19th century Europe, who diagnosed a connection between knowledge and power. The anarchist Bakunin was one of the first and most prophetic. But the Marxist Lenin produced the most famous version, designing a party of intellectuals as the vanguard of social revolution. His colleague Trotsky, who actually led the Bolshevik coup and created the Red Army to defend it, survived just long enough to see their revolutionary party become the entrenched elite of a police state. Trotsky's bitter diagnosis became the basis of a whole genre of 20th century 'new class' theories, where intellectuals were seen as power holders, contenders for power, bearers of power/knowledge, or essential cogs in a new technocracy.

What gave force to the idea of technocracy was the rising military and economic importance of science, in the era of atomic weapons and automation, and a great expansion of the workforce involved in producing and circulating knowledge – researchers, teachers, technicians and knowledge-based professions of all kinds. Starting in the United States, higher education was transforming from a small elite concern to a mass education system supported by the state. By the end of the 20th century

it was common to speak of a 'knowledge economy' and 'knowledge industries'. The size of the university system was now seen as a measure of any country's modernisation, and metrics were invented for research output. New forms of competing and boasting appeared with them: at one university I have visited, there are specially-marked parking places for the cars of Nobel Prize winners.

This could only happen because old forms of higher education had radically changed. The research university, invented in 19th century Germany and expanded in the 20th century United States, became the global model. By the end of the 20th century, information technology was turned back on the knowledge system that had produced it: universities, libraries and disciplines were computerised and increasingly integrated through the Internet. The crucial bearer of knowledge now is not the lone scholar poring over manuscripts by candle-light, but the massive remote-access database.

What this means is that in 21st century conditions, an individualist model of the intellectual – heroic or sinister – is out of date. Knowledge in our time is mainly produced and circulated collectively. This doesn't only mean that large teams and expensive machines are important, though that is true enough – and a major reason why organised knowledge is still dominated by the rich countries of the global North. Think of the Large Hadron Collider, the Human Genome Project, or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Even individual researchers, of whom there are many, depend on an international industry of publishers, journals and conferences, software and websites, grants and fellowships.

More important, contemporary researchers normally work in big organisations, and that environment gives them their oxygen. About half of the workforce of modern universities are not academic staff. On their technical, administrative and financial work, and on their commitment to their jobs, the production and circulation of knowledge absolutely depends. Modern knowledge systems are built on complex divisions of labour and extended workforces. Individual creativity and initiative are still there, and still vital, but operating through a social machinery – above all, through cooperation.

Contemporary intellectual work, then, depends on a collective intellectual: a workforce, a set of institutions, a network of cooperation. And that poses new questions for people concerned with the future of universities. Formerly, considering the future meant polite discussions of the humanist curriculum and the Educated Man. We now face more radical questions about how to sustain the workforce and sustain the social process of producing

and circulating knowledge. And those questions have become urgent, in the face of powerful pressures that are narrowing the institutions, dividing the workforce and commercialising the networks.

## Australia's place in the global economy of knowledge

Australian universities go back to a couple of small institutions launched in the mid-19th century. It was a bit surprising that the raw and violent settler colonies in the Great South Land should give birth to universities, but these institutions were not much like the new model in Germany. They weren't expected to produce new knowledge. They were certainly not to learn anything from the Aboriginal inhabitants. Their job was to transmit the knowledge system of bourgeois Europe to the young gentlemen who were going to manage the colonies within the British imperial system. This, by and large, they did. An academic workforce was imported from England, Scotland and Ireland, and trained local engineers, doctors, lawyers, administrators and teachers. Research was effectively a hobby, apart from the data-gathering undertaken for development purposes by the colonial state.

That changed decisively around the 1940s, in the midst of a profound shift in national development strategy. An industrial economy and a welfare state were now being built. First Labor, in the agenda of post-war reconstruction, then the new Liberal Party led by R G Menzies, committed to an expanded public university system. Not only an expanded system, but one with a serious research capacity, beyond the remit of the CSIRO. That was the original rationale for creating the ANU, and the other universities quickly followed suit in expanding research.

By the end of the 1970s a strikingly homogeneous, centrally-funded and Australia-wide system of research universities had been built. The academic workforce was gaining the capacity to sustain itself, by the expansion of doctoral education. The non-academic side of the workforce found stable public-sector conditions of employment. This system remained socially selective: it had few Indigenous students, few working-class White students, and few recent migrants. The main change in social composition was the rising number of middle-class White women. The curriculum reflected fewer British and more US influences, gave a larger place to the natural sciences, but remained Eurocentric.

Australian capitalists, notoriously, invest little in research. They rely on a global economy of knowledge: import the technology they need, buy the political campaigns they

need, and have few other cultural concerns. Twentieth-century modernisation in Australia required a publicly-funded research capacity, and the investment gradually bore fruit. Recently the boast could be made that Australia produces 3 per cent of the world's research, going by publication counts. Just as in tennis and swimming, we are punching above our weight.

Practically all of that output, however, is within paradigms imported from the global North. We certainly produce lots of empirical findings, which are fed into databases and journals. Our researchers are rewarded for 'international' publication, we are not parochial. But that doesn't mean publishing in Brazil or Bangladesh. It means Western Europe and North America, where the top journals in the citation counts are published, and that's where Australian researchers head for advanced training and recognition.

The global economy of knowledge is qualitatively as well as quantitatively unequal. Developing concepts and methods, and organising the global accumulation of data, is the role of the global centre; importing concepts and methods and exporting data to fit them is the role of the global periphery. Australian politicians like to pretend we are part of the mighty West. But in the realm of knowledge we show exactly the pattern that the philosopher Paulin Hountondji has identified in Africa and called 'extraversion', i.e. dependence on authority from outside your own society. However skilful individual researchers are, Australia's university system has not developed an autonomous capacity for theory. It does not produce new shared paradigms for thinking about society, nature or survival. Indeed, it hasn't even produced its own viable concept of a university, as the recent trends in policy reveal.

### The crisis of sustainability

During the 1980s another basic shift in development strategy occurred. The new doctrine is internationally known as 'neoliberalism', an unfortunate name as there is nothing very liberal about it. For Australia, it meant a shift from state-supported industrialisation and public-sector growth to free-market ideology, a steady squeeze on public services, and a turn back to export industries as the engine of growth – especially large-scale mining. The Australian economy was de-regulated and opened to flows

of international capital. The profit-making corporation became the model for public sector organisations.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Australian higher education was restructured under this ideology, now shared by Labor and Coalition parties. Universities and colleges were amalgamated in an amazing free-for-all that cast vice-chancellors as competing entrepreneurs in takeover battles. The university sector was thus opened to a wider social range of students, as Dawkins, the Labor Minister who launched the restructure, intended.

But the democratic possibilities in this moment were immediately undermined by three other parts of the strategy. One was the re-introduction of fees, on the neoliberal 'user-pays' principle. The second was policies that forced universities, instead of working together, to act like firms competing against each other

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for funding, students, and prestige. The result was a growing stratification within the sector, consciously pursued by the self-selected 'Group of Eight'. The third, and probably the most important, was the growth of a powerful managerial elite

inside all the universities. This was increasingly modelled on management in the transnational corporate world, and increasingly recruited from corporate business.

Both government policy, and the interests of the new managers, thus re-shaped universities as neoliberal businesses, gradually being eased from the public into the private sector. The proportion of university funds provided from the federal budget has fallen drastically (from about 90 per cent to near 40 per cent), while in the same years managerial salaries have risen spectacularly – we now have vice-chancellors on packages of a million dollars a year, including bonuses, and there is no ceiling yet.

Universities controlled by corporate-style managers and acting like firms were able to find a new place in the Australian public realm and in the global economy of knowledge. I don't think it was part of the Dawkins plan to turn universities directly into an export industry, but that's what they became in the 1990s and 2000s. Faced with declining government support, university managers found their most lucrative customers were overseas students, who could be charged much higher fees than local students. And governments had their backs covered: if the country's universities could tap an overseas funding source, they wouldn't embarrassingly collapse. So managements and governments together became

entrepreneurs in the global boom of commercial higher education. The basic idea was to cash in the splendid collective resource created by public investment, and the hard work of university staff, over the previous fifty years. Hardly any new investment was required – as an export industry, it was better than iron ore!

But there are costs to all this; and following sound neoliberal logic, the costs are supposed to be borne by the customers and the workers. The fees charged to domestic students have steadily risen, and the managements are now trying, in collusion with the Coalition Government, to deregulate them completely. Dependence on fluctuating overseas demand has made university planning erratic, has shifted resources into easily saleable degrees and starved other areas of the curriculum, and has created an enormous incentive to rely on marketing hype and skimp on the solid, and expensive, educational follow-through. The complaints we have been hearing from overseas students are not trivial.

Meanwhile the workforce in Australian universities has been increasingly subjected to modern corporate methods of labour discipline. One favoured strategy is to fragment the workforce, by outsourcing parts of the operation: printing, ICT support, security, and more, have gone this way. At the University of Sydney even our Research Ethics procedures are now controlled by a website bought from a corporate vendor! Another strategy is to lower labour costs by casualising the work. The university managers don't publish these data, but the NTEU estimates that about half the undergraduate teaching across Australia is now done by casual labour. Yet another strategy involves 'performance management' regimes. These have grown more elaborate as mechanisms of surveillance, relevant *inter alia* for choosing 'underperforming' staff for forced redundancy, and have the especially useful effect of obliging staff to monitor themselves, and report their performance to their managers.

What has been overlooked in the policy world is the cumulative impact of the neoliberal turn on the workforce, knowledge systems and culture of universities – the impact on the collective intellectual, in the terms I suggested earlier.

Casualisation, and job insecurity more generally, is bad for any workers but specifically undermines the sustainability of an intellectual workforce. If four or five years of a PhD lead mostly to years of hand-to-mouth struggle, if half our undergraduate teaching is done by people who don't have time to prepare it properly, if we drastically undermine the morale of those workers on whom our intellectual future depends, then we have

failed to create conditions where the collective social resource represented by universities can be reproduced over time. That's what I call a crisis of sustainability.

I think there is a widespread sense among university staff that something has gone deeply wrong. The growing inequality within universities, the new techniques of surveillance and control, the periodic outsourcing, restructuring and forced redundancy, are producing a level of distrust and alienation that is qualitatively new. The Australian university as an institution no longer trusts the professionalism and commitment of its staff. Industrial democracy in universities has declined steeply, as managerial prerogative has risen. Surveillance and accountability mechanisms, now usually on-line, have multiplied.

All too often, the accountability is a fake. Staff sadly learn to produce the appearance of compliance, while managers produce the appearance of 'consultation' with actually no democratic accountability downwards. Meanwhile the institutions have created a whole marketing and public-relations machinery, to present a glossy, fictionalised facade to potential students and potential employees. (How many marketing brochures and websites now picture Australian universities as anything other than sun-drenched holiday resorts full of happy students and beaming staff?). For an institution whose deepest rationale is its concern with truth, whose claim on social resources is that it will grapple with the tough issues and do the hard work required for the most advanced forms of knowledge, the neoliberal turn and managerial takeover are building up a cultural disaster.

## What can we do?

This analysis implies that we are in for a long-term struggle. Corporate management is now entrenched in universities, has political backing, and claims to speak for the sector. (The media commonly report the Vice-Chancellors' mouthpiece, 'Universities Australia', as 'the body representing Australian universities', an Orwellian triumph.) Opposition parties in Federal Parliament jibbed at the 2014 fee-deregulation moves, but are not criticising the current level of fees, the back-door privatisation, the managerial elite, the milking of overseas students, or the insecurity of much of the workforce.

Nor, to tell the truth, has either major party in Parliament thought beyond the current neoliberal model of dependent economic development, though that model has always been socially divisive, massively polluting, and is now plainly in trouble with the fall in global

commodity prices. Australian universities have a limited future as an export industry, as higher education systems expand elsewhere; we were given a sharp warning by the financial crisis of 2007-08 but precious little policy rethinking followed. One of the most useful things universities could do for themselves would be to launch a sustained investigation of other socio-economic futures for the country, and the role of knowledge institutions in those futures.

It is important that we appreciate the intangible wealth already in the university system – what organisation charts call the human resources. Universities can get by without the millionaire managers and the gleaming tower blocks; we cannot get by with a demoralised or disintegrating workforce. It's the commitment of a diverse workforce to make a complex knowledge institution work that allows the modern intellectual project to continue. There is an occupational culture here that embeds the passion for knowledge, and makes workers of all kinds proud to be working specifically for a university. In our day, the vital custodian of that occupational culture is the union. I'm very glad the NTEU has been sponsoring discussions of teaching and learning, and reflecting on the future of the sector, as well as tackling immediate industrial issues.

This culture is already being tested in protective industrial struggles, and we have had some success. The strategic problem is to turn the pride and the worry into a positive agenda for rebuilding universities. Here, I think, we have a great hidden asset, because there have been continuing efforts to work beyond the managerial framework. There are many local attempts to democratise workplaces, teaching, and the process of knowledge-making. Often these innovations link university staff to communities outside the walls, expanding knowledge projects beyond the disciplinary framework. It's important to document, publicise and build on this

experience. Despite a generation of market ideology, there is still solid popular support for public higher education. The 'knowledge economy' is, so far, a myth in Australia so far as power-holders are concerned. Our dominant businesses invest very little in knowledge creation, and our governments have been dis-investing in higher education. Yet there is a social recognition that knowledge is important. Education always appears as one of the top concerns in public opinion polls, and the flow of students wanting higher education continues and is socially diversifying.

Knowledge of the natural world, of culture and of our own society, and an education system up to its task, are needed for a democratic future. The collective labour required to support, disseminate, and grow that knowledge is above all the job of university workers. This is not a comfortable trade to be in, right now; but it is an essential one.

**Raewyn Connell retired from her University Chair in the University of Sydney in July 2014.**

### Some background resources

Forsyth, H. (2014). Dreaming of higher education. *Southerly*, 74(2), 119-149. A beautifully written, reflective essay on the current situation in Australian universities and academic staff's responsibilities. Her *History of the Modern Australian University* (NewSouth Publishing, 2014) is essential for the deeper background.

Hil, R. (2012). *Whackademia: An Insider's Account of the Troubled University*. Sydney: NewSouth Publishing. This is a lively and well-informed polemic with lots of sharp insights into the organisational craziness.

Australian Government. (2012). *Australia in the Asian Century: White Paper*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. As a major example of neoliberal thinking about education and global relations, this cynical and cliché-ridden document, produced under the previous Labor Government, is very revealing.

Connell, R. (2011). *Confronting Equality: Gender, Knowledge and Global Change*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin. Chapters 5, 6, and 8 give the background to my analysis of intellectual labour, neoliberalism and global knowledge structures.