

OPINION

Watch out! The great university implosion is on its way

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With China supposedly undermining our national security and way of life, and causing ructions on university campuses, it's time to take stock of the threat before us. So serious has the situation become that some have called for the equivalent of a dad's army capable of protecting our shores from possible Chinese incursions. (Border security, you see, are still flat out trying to turn back the boats).

It's a worrying situation. Forget John Pilger's documentary, *The Coming War with China*: international relations and intelligence experts are suggesting that the war has already started. Yes indeed, it's time for our brave Captain Mainwarings to step up and defend our beloved homeland. Happily, though, Field Marshal Scott ('good bloke') Morrison is addressing the threat – I mean, just look at how he's responding to the bush fires - by making sure that the Pacific Islanders are on side (if only they'd stop whinging about climate change), and that the army, navy and air force are on full alert. Meanwhile, we have to contend with an enemy within: elements of the Chinese student cohort who have stirred up opposition against pro-Hong Kongers, even spying on them and occasionally beating them up (apparently). The Coalition Government, ASIO, the Australian Federal Police and conscripted university managers are onto this too, ensuring that freedom of speech prevails on our campuses. (Interestingly, such freedoms do not seem to extend to whistle-blowers who expose the bugging of foreign governments, but let's not go there).

Predictably, mainstream reporting on the growth of 'Chinese influence' has been less than illuminating. Journalists – especially hacks at *The Australian* – have probed every conceivable dark corner to get at the facts. But they're not the only ones interested in this ghastly scenario. It seems that the moral panic over China has reached hysterical proportions. Chinese infiltration, or so it seems, is everywhere, from excessive housing investments and land buy-ups to dodgy dinner dates with ALP officials; and from Confucian Institutes (as fronts for espionage activities) to the take-over of student unions by Chinese students. Concern has even arisen over the spread of Chinese takeaways and the growing demand for Mandarin courses, both clearly promoting Chinese influence across the nation. And don't forget the sinister 5G network – or the coronavirus.

Recently, three journalists from the *Sydney Morning Herald/The Age* (Baker, Hunter & Bonyhady, 2019) took the brave step of striding into the murky world of Chinese students to expose the shadowy goings on in our hallowed halls. Following some general observations on 'the Chinese issue', their report morphs into a more general discussion of how our universities deal with international students – no trivial matter, given their contribution to university coffers. Apparently – surprise, surprise - not all of these student visitors are happy campers. After all, our journos inform us, they have to fork out up to three times more for their education than domestic students, often live in dilapidated and over-crowded accommodation,

and feel estranged, lonely and depressed. Many of them struggle with the most basic English, which makes reading turgid academic texts and assignment completion tough going. All-in-all, it's not what they expected from the much-vaunted Aussie 'student experience'.

But as to the worrying proposition that some overseas students might be gifted passes for their courses – an allegation that's been floating around for years – the ever-perky Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University, Michael (no-problems-here) Spence, rejects this scandalous assertion outright. Now; call me naive, but if you want to find out what's really going on at the University of Sydney, or any other university for that matter, why would you rely on the skewed insights of an overpaid CEO (Hil & Lyons, 2018), who has a vested interest in protecting the USyD brand? Worried by such questionable investigative reportage, I decided to write directly to the said journo. This is a slightly amended version of the original:

Dear eminent investigative reporters (I didn't really say that)

Congratulations on your recent splendid article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* about Chinese students in Australian universities.

While I agree with a lot of what you have to say, there are a few points you may wish to consider as you consider your next contribution on this topic. I hope you don't mind me doing this, but my long experience as an academic at several Australian universities gives me some limited insights into these sometimes- vexed places. At the end of the day, of course, these are only my views, so please feel free to ignore them.

1. Your article relies too much on higher education 'experts' and senior university managers for its information, the latter have a vested interest in asserting that all is well in uni-land, don't you think? Well, contrary to what they suggest, it isn't all sweetness and light, I can assure you. For example, V-C Michael Spence's view that universities place no pressure on academics to pass students is utterly absurd and patently untrue. The institutional pressures to pass students (including those from overseas) are well known, as I point in my book *Selling Students Short: Why you won't get the university education you deserve*. (Available at discount price from your local second-hand bookshop). If you talk to most academics, they would tell you (in no uncertain terms) that when it comes to the grading of student assignments, they are pressured – subtly and otherwise – to comply with the sacred bell curve (a nineteenth century European construct of questionable worth). They will also tell you that the bar for passing students has been significantly lowered over the years. When too many students fail their assignments, eyebrows are raised among heads of school, deans, and/or teaching and learning 'experts'. In some universities, failing students are granted an automatic right to resubmit (sometimes they're charged for the privilege). Academics will further tell you that one

of the main challenges they face when assessing their students is how to lower the bar sufficiently to ensure that most pass, without totally compromising one's academic integrity. Additionally, to obtain good student evaluations – key to acceptable performance reviews and therefore to increasing one's chances of promotion – then you don't want to cheese-off students by failing them or giving them grades they're not happy with, do you? You see, few if any students complain when they get an HD, but hand them a pass or even credit, or God-forbid, a fail, all hell breaks loose: complaints to heads of school, terrible evaluation ratings, the spreading of malicious rumours, threats of violence etc. The 'dumbing down' tendency of which I speak isn't always as crude as what I've suggested; practices vary from one academic/institution to another, but rest assured, such practices are commonplace in today's universities. (Managers will say otherwise, of course, before prattling on about 'excellence' and the like).

2. At the risk of appearing pompous (which of course, I am), here's an idea for any future inquiry into Uni-land: Why not talk directly to mainstream academics about their experiences of university life? Forget the lumpen professoriate, just interrogate those poor sods who do the grunt work, many of them underpaid casuals, and you'll get an entirely different picture of what transpires in our so-called higher education institutions.
3. By virtue of being in a cut-throat global market, universities are prone to concealing their shortcomings and to peddling illusions of 'academic rigour', 'excellence' and all that guff. The chasm between claim and reality couldn't be wider. (Read my book! You'll love it. I've sold at least ten copies).
4. The overseas student recruitment industry is riddled with corrupt practices, some of which you identify, but many which you don't. Again, see my book. It has a very nice cover.
5. The reasons for diminishing standards in our universities are complex and varied but are closely linked to the marketisation of the tertiary sector, and the opening up of universities to global competition. This has been accompanied by entirely new and oppressive – sometimes ruthless – systems of top-down management focussed on revenue raising and brand promotion. In short, the entire enterprise has been well and truly neoliberalised. Please see Raewyn Connell's excellent book, *The Good University*. It also has a nice cover.

Overseas students are indeed a cash cow for universities, even though some VCs get tetchy at the suggestion. Their experiences in these places are often dismal and a far cry from the vapid promise of never-ending fun and high-quality learning.

I think I'll stop there; I do go on a bit. Thanks anyway for taking the time to read this letter. I'm a great admirer of good

investigative journalism which, sadly, is rapidly disappearing in the mainstream media. (Sorry to be so contentious and opinionated). That said, I have every confidence that you will take on board my observations, and maybe even check them out. I am available for interviews day and night, but preferable not while the rugby or tennis is on.

Best wishes

Adjunct Professor Richard Hil

I am of course still waiting on a reply from the journalists in question. A friend of mine suggested that I should 'get a life' because a reply will not be forthcoming any time soon. I must say, I find it sad and bewildering that rather than attempting to talk with people at the coalface, as it were, journalists continually rely on senior university managers or luminaries from think tanks to try and make sense of university-land. It's like asking Donald Trump to comment on ethical business practices – you're going to get a skewed perspective. Right?

We shouldn't be too shocked or surprised by any of this. Universities have a strong interest in portraying themselves as bastions of propriety and high-quality education. And guess what? It worked, for now at least, and especially when it comes to international students.

Partly as a result of government cutbacks, the pressure to cross-subsidise research through inflated student fees has been enormous. And given all the rankings baloney that goes with global market competition, the desire to protect the reputation of universities has never been stronger. It's why they employ armies of marketing and public relations personnel to produce and promote all those puerile slogans, tag-lines and ads. It's also why they pay 'consultants' enormous amounts of money to tell them what they already know and why they recruit senior managers from other parts of the corporate world. It's all about image – and sales. Again, there's nothing all that unusual about this – it's the corporate business model in action. It's the same reason why fossil fuel companies seek to portray themselves as sustainability crusaders, why banks spend so much time concealing their dodgy deals, why prisons say they're about rehabilitation, and why many aged care homes claim they care while leaving clients alone in dark corners. It often takes commissions of inquiry, whistle-blowers and shock-horror media reports to lift the lid on what's going on.

The problem with the university sector is that journalists are still in the realm of don't-ask-don't-tell; whistle blowers are hard to come by, and the findings and recommendations from inquiries, if and when they happen, appear to be, if not entirely ignored, then invariably fudged. The 2015 ICAC report into universities and the international student market, *Learning the hard way: managing corruption risks associated with international students at universities in NSW*, is a case in point (ICAC, 2015). Check it out for yourself.

'Corruption risks' notwithstanding, it has become glaringly obvious that Australian universities are massively over-reliant on overseas students for their income and face an epic implosion when this revenue stream dries up, which it will once China and India build up their own sectors. It's happening right now.

Watch out!

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