

WORKSHOP REPORT

Markets and the Modern University

Conveners: *Margaret Thornton FASSA (ANU) and Glenn Withers AO FASSA (ANU)*

ANU, 30-31 May 2013

This workshop arose from a concern about the way knowledge is being shaped by the commodification of higher education. Rather than being regarded principally as a public good, knowledge is being transformed into a private good that is exercising a profound effect on the social sciences. After 25 years, the shift of the cost of Australian higher education from taxpayers to "consumers" is almost complete. Some Australian law schools, for example, now receive as little as 10 per cent of their income from governments.

Following the Browne Report in the UK, the government there accepted that from 2013, no public money would be used to support the teaching of any undergraduate program, apart from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM subjects). It may be only a matter of time before this model is emulated too in Australia, which is likely to have significant ramifications for the social sciences.

While a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to the broad policy issues associated with the corporatisation of universities, comparatively little work has been devoted to the impact on the disciplines. Margaret Thornton's book, *Privatising the Public University: The Case of Law* (Routledge, 2012) is one of the few such studies and was the impetus for this workshop. It was therefore thought to be timely to focus on the ramifications for the social sciences more generally and to compare disciplinary experiences and responses with a view to thinking through the way forward.

The evidence suggests that as funding for public universities contracts and institutions are forced down the entrepreneurial and managerial path, they tend to adjust their primary teaching and research mission in favour of raising private revenue. The more government funding contracts, the more insistent are the business imperatives. High fees exert a similarly distorting effect on students. They evince a preference for the functional and the applied over the theoretical and the critical in the interests of credentialism and careerism. At the same time, despite reduced public funding shares, official requirements imposed on the universities often also seem to increase and lead to heavy regulatory and reporting load for academics.

Academics themselves are also expected to be entrepreneurial in seizing and capitalising on teaching and research opportunities. The pressure to perform and reinvent the self according to the dictates of the moment has caused academic careers to become less fulfilling than they once were as almost every activity is now expected to have use value in the academic market. A focus on the production of new knowledge workers and citizen consumers also has far-reaching consequences for the nature of society, including the future of democracy.

With these concerns in mind, Margaret Thornton and Glenn Withers convened a workshop, which was held at the ANU College of Law, 30-31 May 2013. The participants represented a broad range of social science disciplines, including Asian studies, economics, education, history, law, philosophy, politics, psychology and sociology. A number of the participants occupied positions as university administrators and several were early career researchers. The heterogeneity of the intellectual and political standpoints of the presenters ensured a rich diversity of views. Some participants invoked their disciplinary knowledge to focus specifically on the state of things in their disciplines, while others used their expertise as a lens through which to analyse and critique the ramifications of the privatising turn in public policy more generally. The impact of the changes on gender in the academy was a notable sub-theme of the presentations.

The after-dinner speaker was Dr Andrew Leigh MP (FASSA), the Federal Member for Fraser. As a \$2.3bn cut to tertiary funding to assist with the funding of the Gonski reform of the primary and secondary education sectors had been announced shortly before the workshop, Dr Leigh's presence led to a spirited debate.

Workshop Themes

The workshop was organised around four main themes, which were broadly construed: theorising the modern university, teaching, research and governance.

(1) Theorising the modern university

Hannah Forsyth (History, University of Sydney) set the scene by addressing the vexed issue of the shift from the disinterested scholar of the early 20th century to one who had become an interested party by century's end. Peter Beilharz (Sociology, La Trobe) focused on the conjunction of time and technology and the way the embrace of the 'hurried life' has skewed the pursuit of knowledge towards facts and information.

Two philosophers from the ANU presented rather different views of where we are and its significance for the constitution of academic knowledge. Geoffrey Brennan rejected the theme of the workshop and its implication that the market was changing things for the worse. Indeed, he argued that the 'good old days' were not so good after all. Fiona Jenkins argued that while philosophical knowledge is, perhaps surprisingly, highly valued within the contemporary context, there is a gendered dimension to what is valued, with the result that it is only certain types of rationalist knowledge that are held in high esteem to the detriment of women in philosophy and feminist knowledge more generally.

(2) Vocationalising the curriculum

Bruce Lindsay (Legal Studies, Deakin) addressed the expansion of disciplinary power in relation to governance of the student-university relationship, which has ballooned into a form of institutional policing power that encompasses a range of regulatory and surveillance technologies. Nigel Palmer (Education, University of Melbourne) considered the university-student transaction and argued that the student experience is becoming more obscure as a result of the ambiguities flowing from the market-like and managerial mechanisms devised by universities. Using legal education as a case study, Margaret Thornton considered the role of

websites and branding in shaping student choice and the way it encourages the construction of students as consumers rather than good civic subjects.

Dianne Kirkby (History, La Trobe) and Kerreen Reiger (Sociology, La Trobe) presented a case study of how organisational change is motivated less by a desire to reform the curriculum than by a managerialist response to market pressure. They argued that the effect undermines constructive social relationships and masculinises further the academic culture.

(3) Researchers as technopreneurs

This theme explored the ramifications for the social sciences of the increasing pressure in favour of applied knowledge and knowledge transfer, consultancies and contract research. There were differing views as to the impact of the new directions. Participants in managerial positions were (perhaps unsurprisingly) more understanding of the directions of corporatisation. For example, Kent Anderson (P V-C (International), Adelaide) reflected on the way academic managers make decisions to which rational academics respond in a manner that accords with pragmatic public policy.

Jill Blackmore (Education, Deakin) elaborated on the way academic capitalism, in conjunction with restructuring, is profoundly affecting women in the social sciences, despite numerical feminisation. Jenny Corbett, Andrew MacIntyre and Inger Mewburn were more optimistic. They presented a more positive interpretation of the research landscape. They argued that marketisation, the new technologies and the multiplicity of funding sources provided new and vibrant research opportunities.

Jane Kenway (Education, Monash), while acknowledging the negative impact of neoliberalism on the academy, was of the view that we should endeavour to make 'hope possible' rather than give in to despair. She cited the role of insurgent intellectuals and collective action campaigners as sources of inspiration.

(4) Governance: Inhabiting an audit culture

A number of presenters were particularly interested in issues of governance. Kanushka Jayasuriya (Political Science, Adelaide) argued that the 'public' university has not disappeared but has been reconstituted as a result of the new regulatory arrangements, giving rise to 'structural opportunity markets'. Economists, such as Tony Aspromorgos (Economics, University of Sydney) and Geoffrey Brennan, were also anxious to point out that a genuinely competitive market was not possible in the case of the university, particularly because the information possessed by universities is not available to consumers. Glenn Withers focused on the distinctions between market, state and community, questioning where universities should be located within this triad. He saw academic autonomy as equally threatened by each of market imperatives, government demands and universities' own internal managerial systems and he sought responses that took the positive from this process of change while preserving distinctive university strengths.

Pip Pattison (Psychology, DVC, University of Melbourne) looked at the changing character of universities and academic work. She thought that we should not be surprised at the corporatisation of universities since corporatisation has become an important development in the economy. She was of the view that research networks, rather than the university itself, were of

greater importance in terms of research. She nevertheless felt that some aspects of corporatisation were regrettable, such as the split between teaching and research.

Conclusion

The participants appreciated the initiative of the conveners in organising the workshop. They wanted the papers to be published and were of the opinion that the ANU E Press (now ANU Press) would be an appropriate publisher especially as it is open-access. Margaret Thornton undertook to develop a proposal, which has since been accepted.

The conveners are grateful to ASSA for funding the workshop and to the ANU College of Law for its support, which included the administrative assistance of COAST (College Outreach and Administrative Support Team).