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Student Dis/satisfaction and Academic Dis/enchantment with Edu-capitalism

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ABSTRACT
Over three decades there has been a shift from ideologies of idealism and educationalism towards instrumentalism in higher education due to the global circulation of neoliberal ideologies. Facilitated by digital technologies and encouraged by international ranking systems, there is a paradoxical trend towards homogenisation rather than heterogeneity in terms of what counts as valued knowledge, producing tensions in national policies, institutional responses and academic work in Australia as elsewhere. The paper identifies the implications of trends driving universities towards entrepreneurialism, hyper-instrumentalism, continual rebranding in their search for distinctiveness in global markets, restructuring towards specialisation, focusing on immediate use-value of research, vocationalising teaching, demand driven curriculum that makes students happy, and the disaggregation of curriculum underpinning new multimodal forms of online learning / management technologies.

As an early career academic in the late 1980s, I was fortunately located in a new regional university, Deakin University, modelled on the UK Open University. The campus was small, with few lecture theatres and teaching spaces, and sparse academic accommodation. But what Deakin provided was increased opportunities in higher education for a new cohort of students, many of them mature-aged women and full-time workers. Deakin gained a reputation for its high quality course materials in terms of both the content and online pedagogy. Our off-campus courses, Masters and PhD, offered not only flexible modes of teaching to predominantly domestic students in outback, interstate and offshore locations, but also a clear conceptual framework that was progressive. These units were supported by large interdisciplinary course teams, development and editing support, and promoted through pedagogical approaches including face-to-face tutorials and teleconferences premised upon a strong sense of curriculum and distance pedagogy. We introduced new technological advancements as they emerged: first video, then CD and DVD during the early 1990s, and finally multiple iterations of advanced learning technology systems such as Blackboard, encouraging a sense of online educational community among students, many of whom we never met.

My reputation as an international, feminist, educational scholar was forged as part of the Deakin "Education Mafia" (Tinning & Sirna, 2011). We came to be known internationally for the quality of the content and critical perspective relative to the US and UK-centric mainstream in the fields of educational administration and policy, curriculum theory and action research (Tinning & Sirna, 2011). Deakin University Press course texts were well regarded for the quality of their production, with authors including international scholars of repute from the USA, Canada, New Zealand and UK

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providing an international perspective. The intellectual influence of the 'Deakin Mafia' was recognised in the Department of Education Science and Training report, *The impact of educational research on policy and practice* (DEST, 2000). This report involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches based on citations and backtracking research influence on both policy and practice also concluded that Australian educational researchers were seen to be over-represented in international journals. What made Deakin distinctive in this context was both the capacity for the geographical and epistemological margins to speak back from critical feminist and post-colonial perspectives to the geographical and epistemological centres (UK and USA) in educational research and policy.

So what is different in 2012? The university sector has now been restructured twice: first at a national level with the Dawkins reforms after 1989 that tied education more tightly to national economy. The context was of the emergence of academic capitalism with its strategies of marketisation, managerialisation, privatisation and internationalisation (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999). Stier (2010: 340) identifies three ideologies (instrumentalism, idealism and educationalism) informing the processes of internationalisation of higher education. The *idealist* ideology assumes that the internationalisation of curriculum and research is desirable. The university is expected to create optimal conditions for good research and education and "foster good morally-conscious citizens" to become leaders who possess global awareness of issues of social justice. *Educationalism* is about valuing learning for its own sake, learning about and from others, "with a focus on curriculum and pedagogy as well as content in ways that that reflect global conditions" (Stier, 2010: 340). Content provides an international perspective and develops intercultural competence and a commitment to human rights and recognition of difference. The *instrumentalist* view sees education as an industry, student mobility as being about profitability, and academic mobility as fuelling the international labour market in ways that facilitate institutional flexibility. High quality 'global' scholars are necessarily mobile in order to increase rankings and content and certification is sold as a commodity. The university's role is to facilitate innovation and sustainable economic development, by contracting out to NGOs, transnational corporations and community groups. Within this paradigm, human capital theories assumed that higher education, if steered by the twin external demand pressures of governments and markets (students and industry), 'added value' to individuals and national knowledge economies (Robertson, 2007).

Phase two has been a global restructuring of student, academic and employment markets and the intensification of processes of marketisation and managerialism, a period post- 2000 marked by a blurring of public and private provision. Given the dominance of the instrumentalist ideology underpinning neoliberal reforms, education has, across all sectors, moved from being a national social democratic project to a transnational capitalist industry characterised by international education markets involving public and private providers as well as multinational corporations such as Pearson and global policy actors promoting largely instrumentalist ideologies (Ball, 2012; Mansell, 2012).

The particular case of Australia

The proliferation of new knowledges arising from the social and epistemological movements of feminism, post-colonialism and indigenous peoples in the earlier phase of educational restructuring de-centred and challenged the dominance of the white Anglophone north (Connell, 2007). The second iteration sees underway a geographical and epistemological re-centring around what constitutes valued knowledge with the rise of global edu-capitalism. In Australia as in the US and UK, policy tensions have emerged in research between the dominance of a 'scientific' norm as to what counts as research excellence on the one hand, and discourses about inter-disciplinarity on the other, with significant effects on some disciplines more than others. In curriculum, there is a trend towards a de-contextualisation and a de-valuation of local content with the push for publication in international (i.e. US or UK) journals and Massive Open Online Courses, potentially de-

professionalising the Australian academics' role in knowledge production. The pressures that have led to these trends are multiple.

One has been the push for the massification of higher education provision to produce the complex skills base required to transition into knowledge-based economies (Brown et. al., 2011). The access and equity policies now make a target of twenty percent of students being 'first in family' to university contingent on some funding. The debate has been about to what extent higher education contributes to the public good and therefore how much an individual student should contribute, with a recent swing towards increased self-funding, as in the UK. Discourses of generic graduate employability attributes jostle against those of personalisation required for more diverse student cohorts.

Australian universities have also suffered simultaneously reduced public investment relative to rising student numbers and increased demands for accountability of how that money is spent, particularly on research, relative to output and immediate public and measurable benefits (Baird, 2011). A new architecture of accountability has been instituted since 2010 in the form of quality assurance of teaching through an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) under the auspice of the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Authority (TEQSA) and the Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) research assessment. Together these focus on visible and measurable proxies of quality—citations, audit trails and student evaluations—increasingly linked to funding. ERA has strengthened not weakened disciplinary categories, and re-privileged particular measures (citations) of quality. Yet such disciplinary boundaries do not map onto individual research profiles or organizational structures. Indeed, the managerial rationale for amalgamations into larger faculties has been to encourage *inter- disciplinarity* (and save money). The humanities and social sciences, often collapsed into one Faculty, have been re-positioned as 'the poor relation' always seeking 'help' or pleading special case against the norms of the natural sciences (MacIntyre, 2010) in a policy and research context which discursively equate innovation with science and technology and not the social sciences or the humanities. For example, the ARC funded a national Science of Learning Centre with four domains: cognitive science, neuroscience, technology *and* pedagogy to the neglect of the contextual (locational disadvantage, isolation, rurality) and social factors (class, race, gender, ethnicity) which often have the most impact on student learning. This indicates both the technologisation and scientisation of what is fundamentally a social practice.

Australian universities are also experiencing a collapsing international student market, a major income source previously premised upon an instrumentalist rather than an idealist or educationalist view. This collapse is due to the high value of the dollar and increased competition from universities in Asia, Europe and North America as well as private providers. This market failure fuels a focus on student demand and satisfaction and heightens arguments for greater regulation to ensure quality (Blackmore, 2008). Yet international university rankings rely on measures of research, not teaching, quality based on self-referencing scales of reputation (Marginson, 2010). This requires institutional flexibility based on an increasingly casualised, differentiated and feminised academic labour market with more teaching-only and research-only positions as the job of teaching, research and service is increasingly an impossibility.

A more recent threat to Australian and other universities arises from what has been termed the 'digital revolution'. *The Sunday Age* (12 August 2012: 12) headlines stated: *"Free courses from world's top unis a swipe away in online revolution"* and "*Unsatisfied students mark down teachers at ANU*" (Australian National University). Universities seek to differentiate themselves from private providers through claiming quality of teaching informed by quality research. Both modes of distinction are now endangered by the trend for elite 'global' universities, such as Stanford, Princeton and Harvard, to offer open access to units and courses online or MOOCs to thousands of students through brokers such as Coursera in online courses in humanities, the sciences and business. Australian universities seeking to market themselves are developing their own specialist MOOCs or integrating elite MOOCs into their programs.

While elite US universities have offered online content free for some time, it is the sudden escalation of demand provoked by rising student debt at the post-graduate level that worries their international competitors. Offering content-free courses protects if not enhances the status by marketing their elite-ness to a global student market. Yet only the few get the on-campus enriched experience that will provide access to the social networks that link into the well-rewarded managerialist-professional core in the global labour market (Brown et. al., 2011). The Ameri-centre not only claims, but also asserts through demand, that it is 'excellent', 'expert' and 'global', the new norm of higher education. Open access is not based on any form of idealism or educationalism based on a cross-cultural transnational project of educational engagement and mutual reciprocity. It is about global edu-capitalism.

At the same time, free access online by elite universities undermines mass university post-graduate markets elsewhere in the context of changing student identity with new demands and concerns. Australian students increasingly view education as a positional good and are highly instrumental in their choices. Most gained access to university through competitive and standardised systems of secondary schooling that focused on single numerical, measurable outcomes. Their future employment is precarious, one reliant upon building portfolio careers in which they package multiple skills, best accumulated by moving horizontally as well as vertically while seeking work satisfaction and lifestyle, thus creating issues of retention for employers (Brown et. al., 2011). Employers seek to recruit flexible and responsive workers with the capacity to communicate, possessing good interpersonal skills, confidence, intercultural competence, and competence in English language skills as well a workplace integrated learning experiences. They are happy if graduates bring a portfolio of MOOCs units as these indicate distinctiveness above and beyond the generic attributes all now possess. They seek 'best fit' above and beyond academic results (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012). And universities seek to provide a distinctive educational experience in the production of these desirable employability skills listed as graduate outcomes. Private providers in the professional training market take up the slack. Thus the credentialising role of universities, the last bastion of distinctiveness, is under threat.

Meanwhile, students are considering whether the degree is worth a lifetime debt as universities are forced to raise the cost of fees (Swain, 2011). As times get tougher, students are aware social networks as much as qualifications lead to the job market (Strathdee, 2005). And while the postgraduate market collapses, professional education at the undergraduate level is being increasingly defined through accreditation processes by national professional standards in engineering, accountancy, nursing and teaching that are rapidly scaling up transnationally, as private players, including the professional bodies, are entering the market (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

These factors produce particular policy tensions for Australian universities again reinventing themselves in this globalised market context. Universities are trying to both develop distinctive niche markets in specialist areas (research and teaching) while maintaining a strong undergraduate student base to address issues of massification and government demands for equity and access. The dominant discourse is that Australia has too many universities, and not all universities can offer a comprehensive liberal education. Each has to develop a niche market of excellence that attracts particular student cohorts. The newer universities are therefore returning to their origins, with the 'Utechs' focusing on technology and science or industry-focused inter-disciplinary oriented fields such as the creative arts. Due to greater competition between universities, and the focus on student demand and satisfaction ratings, the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, as in the UK, are endangered, if not disappearing, in many including the elite sandstone universities. This differentiation is indicative of the emergence of a hierarchy of universities based on research intensity that will become consolidated when funding is attached to ERA outcomes. There is little indication of increased funding for research, with the Australian Research Council tightening up its rules and funding larger international projects with cross-disciplinary teams. In response,

universities are developing university wide cross-disciplinary research centres, staffed by casual research-only staff (Blackmore, 2014).

With regard to 'teaching smarter' to address increasing student numbers as the market is deregulated, the executive discourse now is that the twenty-first century student is a digital native and wants online learning whereas the ageing academic is a digital novice (Lea & Jones, 2011). Star performers in teaching, often international academics from elite universities, are now seen to be what keeps students engaged. Therefore, it is argued, why 'duplicate' content when there is high quality content delivered online by celebrity 'international' academics located in a few global, elite, 'Anglocentric' northern institutions that can be incorporated or accredited, but often not 'domesticated' in local institutions? This is seen to both maintain if not raise the quality of content, increase flexibility by freeing up academics to do research, while offering an internationalised curriculum to produce the global worker. Certainly students want multimodal pedagogies with content online that is readily accessible and flexibile, but they also desire interaction with academics and peers (Lea & Jones, 2011). Such a discourse positions most academics as aggregators, translators, facilitators or transmitters of content (and research) rather than as producers and definers as to what counts as valued knowledge.

Academic dis/content and dis/enchantment

In 2012, there is widespread unease within the academic workforce, recently articulated in Richard Hill's *Whakapedia* (2012) and Stefan Collini's *What Are Universities For?* (2012). Numerous studies identify the disenchantment of academics with universities and their management (Coates & Goedegeburre, 2010). Major concerns include the marginalisation of the disciplines of the social sciences and humanities relative to the dominance of a scientific norm (Nussbaum, 2010; Collini, 2012), and the silencing of particular radical discourses including critical perspectives such as feminism and anti-racism in the context of structural and neo-conservative discursive backlash (Tomlinsons, 2010). The role of the professor and academic is no longer about being a public intellectual, other than speaking within the constraints of their university- defined expertise and aligning their research to university priorities (MacFarlane, 2012).

Academics see the commodification of curriculum, the supplanting of the local by the global, and the push for alignment of all teaching and research with university priorities, as limiting their professional autonomy, devaluing indigenous research, skewing towards vocational content, and restricting what and how content is taught. Ironically, it is those students needing the pastoral support, the newcomers to higher education, that will be receiving packaged and commodified online curriculum from multiple universities, while a liberal undergraduate education remains the domain of the elite. For example Melbourne University's restructuring along the European model of a liberal undergraduate program, will retain its distinctiveness relative to other global elite universities. Thus Stanford's President talks about "Remodeling our curriculum for the 21st Century": "At a time when many institutions are abandoning a commitment to a liberal education, Stanford's faculty believed that our future graduates will be best served by being broadly educated" (Hennessey, 2012: 6).

Whereas many academics criticised online education for its fragmentation of course or curriculum design from content, pedagogy and assessment, now content is even more abstracted from the idea of curriculum. Curriculum is understood as decisions regarding the aims, outcomes, content and pedagogical relationships of a course or unit, about the relationships between theory and practice, between experiential and abstract learning, about epistemology and methodology, ethics as well as sequencing. Each discipline has a particular sense of curriculum content: about what needs to be taught in order to understand the nature of the paradigms and key concepts that inform any field in specific contexts. While academics have always incorporated international research into their courses, and universities have accredited units and courses from other universities, they have usually been selected on the basis of a curriculum rationale. Now students choose units on the basis

of their interest or perceived use value or the celebrity status of lecturers. While this nourishes the discourse of personalisation of learning, students do not know necessarily what they want or what is required in their chosen field of work (Blackmore, 2008). Furthermore, the assumption is that content is context free. This may be the case for physics, technology and some of the natural sciences, but it is not the case with regard to the social sciences and humanities or many of the sciences or even economics where context really matters. Additionally, what happens to local content and indeed the role of Australian academics when content is incorporated increasingly without a framework of analysis that facilitates students' understanding of the significance of context? Finally, if the local is devalued how do the epistemological and geographical margins speak back to the centre, as necessary for the production of knowledge globally?

The demise of the disciplines in some universities also raises serious questions with respect to how we understand inter-disciplinarity. Where will the disciplines be taught and who gets access to disciplinary training when the social sciences and humanities are no longer offered in many universities (Collini, 2012)? Newer universities see the Humanities and Social Science disciplines as servicing inter-disciplinarity and the technological, medical and hard science disciplines as the responsibility of the elite universities. But how can one have inter-disciplinarity without a disciplinary base? Likewise, are generic graduate skills cross-disciplinary? Jones (2009: 85) "challenges the assumption that generic attributes transcend disciplinary knowledge", and indicates the significance of the "disciplinary context in the construction of generic skills and attributes". In education, a multi-disciplinary field rather than a discipline, Furlong and Lawn (2011: 1) question whether these trends have squeezed out the power of disciplinary contributions to the study of education? Do the remnants of the past now only live on in the routines of method, not in the analytical strength of disciplines? Does the absence of reference back in much that is published, the absence of conceptual communities or disciplinary based theorization, do these now mean that the (disciplinary) past is another country?

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the context of restructuring where redundancy is a constant possibility and the casualisation of academic work is rampant, overwhelmed and overworked academics are expected to teach and research equally well, to measure up on student evaluations, to be happy and not critical, and just revel in their passion for research and teaching. Yet academics talk about their loss of professional autonomy and control over their core work of teaching and research due to processes of intensification, corporate demands for institutional alignment, increasingly prescriptive approaches to content on the one hand and lack of sense of curriculum on the other, and now the devaluing of contextualised content and research (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007). The question is how the learner-centred focus of the digital, entrepreneurial university seeking to be forever responsive to students and employers, provides improved access for more students without downgrading the role of the academic as an educator, producer of knowledge, and critical intellectual, and constraining the university within an ideology of instrumentalism without regard for idealism and educationalism.

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