

“The Non-University” and the Manager

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We have been seeing over the last few decades the birth of the non-university, an institution hollowed out of its seminal functions: teaching and scholarship. Such an institution emphasises the functions of commerce and branding not dissimilar to the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company), dedicated to goods and services and the establishment of trading hubs. In 2007, the Vice Chancellor of Griffith University [would note](#) how 11 Australian universities “including my own have 5 or more campuses.”

Pedagogical instruction has become a matter of popularity contests, fuelled by giddy grade inflations on the part of academics who are, let’s face it, often not doing the actual grading. That part of the process is reserved for toiling sessional or casual workers who scrape, labour and hope, often in vain, that they will find a spot of middle-class security. Their life is one of temporary contracts and elusive tenure, a true [academic underclass](#) seduced by the elusion of patronage.

The issue of research has also been hijacked by the circuitous nature of research grants. The non-university specialises in workshops run by robotic consultants and endless sessions peppered by power points, preparing the unwise academic for an uncertain future where time is spent in a ceaseless drive for irrelevance. When a grant is received, it is specifically tailor made for insipid trendiness, the latest pop sensation that creates pop-up industries and employment for minions. Universities will, naturally, take a cut. Importantly, getting one grant will mean getting another. A family of sort crops up, and you are guaranteed a line of funding that does not necessarily need proof of use or evidence of worth. Grants, in other words, displace scholarship.

Heading, controlling and asphyxiating the non-university is the layer of not infrequently venal officialdom known as managers. Their impending influence across society was already given a good reading by James Burnham, whose [The Managerial Revolution](#) (1941) remains all too relevant. Central to his thesis was the claim that capitalist society would ultimately transform into a managerial one, one where the masses would be told in no uncertain terms that the classless society was an illusion, with state institutions essentially becoming the “property” of management.

Central to the incidence of university management is the divorce between owning the means of production and the control of their distribution. Adolf A. Berle and Gardiner C. Means supplied the relevant observations in [The Modern Corporation and Private Property](#) (1932). With organisations becoming more complex, along with their varied methods of production, a new class of managers hired by capitalist owners came into existence. Direct control was thereby relinquished.

The modern non-university is the very incarnation of this principle, one that sees the academic class forfeiting control over the means of production: their scholarship and teaching. Academic labour, with its fruits of learning, is influenced, observed and ultimately controlled by management. Management, in turn, burgeons with the self-justified rationale that more managers are needed. Fictional projects drive this growth; more committees are deemed necessary, and, importantly, nothing is ever done.

The university manager is a born and dedicated philistine, and is one of the most important reasons why such institutions are not only failing students but failing staff. It is managers who, untutored but entirely self-interested, feather their nests while stomping on the innovative and shutting out the novel. The world of ideas is a world of offense, dangerous and to be avoided.

Within university management are the turncoats known as failed academics. Incapable of writing, researching and teaching, these people, unburdened by their banal resume move into a dreary world of paper clips, staplers and signatures, knowing that they can be promoted up a ladder filled with endless forms and bundles of paperwork. One Australian university is even proud of having a Vice Chancellor who is rather light on education, not daring to even have a doctoral thesis to his name. Such credentials would be an impediment in a non-university.

The fundamental goal of management is not merely to control, monitor and mediate performance on the part of the neutered academic, an insistence that thought is obscene. (Thought, by its very act, cannot be *managed*.) The academic must be restrained before the all-seeing-eyes of the brand label police and authoritarians.

Work-plans – because cerebral activity and inspiration can miraculously become the subject of a spreadsheet or the subject of itemisation – are designed in order to be used against academic staff. Online Modules, fostered in the true Orwellian spirit, ensure a degree of disgruntled humility. They are generally of no consequence, seeing as they will be breached by university managers with impunity, but these *must* be undertaken by staff. Know the “values” of a university; appreciate “diversity”; know your place and worship the next dogma and, above all, do not criticise “hard working” management. A module on hypocrisy would also be well worth taking, but irony and humour are the stuff of poison to a university manager.

A return to the university, one thriving with students and engaged scholarship would be a jolly thing. But the chances of that happening are glacial, remote and unpopular. The non-university will only be killed off when the students stop coming, or when governments see fit to curb their funding. The problem in the latter case, as it has been for decades, is that students and unions will protest, thereby inadvertently protecting the managers who influence them. The fundamental truth is that most of these bodies run on the blood of those who pay them. Drying up the resources will see management cannibalise itself, a mortal competition to the finish. Now wouldn't that be fun?

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