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Hard Labour? Academic Work and the Changing Landscape of Higher Education

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INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER
EDUCATION RESEARCH VOLUME 7

**HARD LABOUR?
ACADEMIC WORK
AND THE CHANGING
LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER
EDUCATION**

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AND THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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CHAPTER 1

TRACING THE FAULT LINES

Tanya Fitzgerald

INTRODUCTION

This book was written across a period of intense turmoil and change in higher education in Australia and England. We are deeply unsettled by these changes and wish to open up the discussion about what it means to be an academic and engage in academic work in the 21st century. Accordingly, each of the authors has nominated a theme or lens through which to examine the changes, tensions and uncertainties that have erupted in higher education. Thus, we offer this book as a constellation of ideas that traverse a number of aspects of our work and identities as academics. The overlap between these ideas is deliberate so that the multiple and complex challenges that underpin the higher education landscape can be examined.

As academics located in universities in two countries we occupy a precarious position in the landscape. In Australia, for example, of the 39 universities, only 13 have a distinctive Faculty of Education and the profound and long-term changes that recent educational reforms will stimulate, will, we believe, accelerate the gradual demise of disciplines such as our own. In England there has been a withdrawal of funding by the state for Humanities and Arts degrees, the net result of which is a tripling of fees to £9,000 per annum. Widespread public protest has ensued and the media has delighted in reproducing images of students in London overturning cars, burning effigies and being generally lawless. Elsewhere there has been a variety of responses to calls for universities to develop new client and

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financial bases. Yale University, for example, has announced plans to establish a campus in Singapore and universities in India are aggressively headhunting leading academics to contribute to and increase their world rankings. Universities are now global businesses.

Changes to university structures, modes of governance and institutional identity that have occurred over the past two decades have inevitably reshaped academic work and the academic profession. And while it may well have taken some eight centuries for this level of significant change to be experienced within universities, there can be little doubt that the academy is no longer isolated from wider market forces. The endemic effects of massification as well as universalisation, managerialism, marketisation, diversification and discourses of organisational renewal, internationalisation and strategic change have taken their toll. These are the fundamental issues at the heart of our scholarly concerns. Our motivation for this book was to map these transformations and ponder what the future of academic work and the academic profession might be. How might academic work be conceptualised, organised and understood? Although this might appear to be a deceptively simple question, in a relatively short period of time, academic work and academic identity has shifted from being largely autonomous, self-governing with particular privileges and public duties, to a profession that has been modernised, rationalised, re-organised and intensely scrutinised. As Rhoades (1998) and others have commented, academics have been re-positioned as managed professionals within a managed university (see also Delanty, 2001; Henkel, 2000; Martin, 1998; Trow, 1993). Yet what also appears inescapable is that the managerial environment and subsequent managerial demands are seductive as 'they lay grounds for new kinds of success and recognition' (Davies, 2005, p. 8).

As authors of this book we are interested in the changing nature of our own scholarly work and the tensions and complexities that surround what it means to be an academic and undertake academic work in a modernised university. We wish to give voice to our concerns as well as provoke readers to think about the significant policy and contextual shifts in institutions of higher education. Our intention is to provoke readers to think about are the 'new' models, structures, policies, institutional practice and discourses that have emerged. What is the distinctive character of the university? What is the role and purpose of the university in the 21st century? How can academics continue to act as the critics and conscience of their societies? What is their scholarly purpose and how has this changed? And, importantly, why is the academy and academic work being re-invented,

by whom and for what purpose? Change and turbulence has prompted new, not necessarily better, ways of working.

UNCERTAINTIES AND TENSIONS

In many respects the future of academic work and what it means to be part of the academic profession is uncertain, as will be outlined in this opening chapter. We are now confronted with challenges such as an ageing academic workforce (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999), declining financial support by government for higher education and external pressures to conform to local and global market demands (Marginson, 2000). Internal pressures include the introduction of corporate practices and entrepreneurialism (Deem, 2001) and the establishment of new forms of academic audits of teaching, research and income (Kolsaker, 2008). These pressures have culminated in a renewed focus on targets, measurement, cost centres and cost drivers, performance management, standards and productivity (May, 2005). The ideology, discourses and axioms of new public management (Deem & Brehony, 2005) that originated in the private sector have been imported into public sector institutions such as universities. Worryingly, new public management compels individuals to perform in the best interests of the organisation (Exworthy & Halford, 1999). Thus, audit processes, or what Power (1997) refers to as a ritual of verification, through the promise that 'accountability', 'performance', 'quality assurance', 'accreditation', 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' make transparent those who do not conform. For academics in particular, this involves a new set of work practices to accommodate the stark reality of a more structured, monitored and managed environment (Kogan & Hanney, 2000; Roberts & Peters, 2008). Put another way, managerialism provides a powerful justification for the assumed right of one group to monitor and control the activity of others. Put simply, what it means to be an academic and engage in academic work has been reconstituted.

Part of the seduction of audit regimes is the creation of an illusion that individuals can name their own targets (e.g. via annual performance plans and goal setting exercises), but the sobering reality is that the boundaries and rules of the game are predetermined (Strathern, 2000a). Although some academics may quickly understand and learn the game, the game itself remains. There are, as Shore and Wright (2000, p. 57) explain, both visible and invisible implications:

The relentless spread of coercive technologies of accountability into higher education ... have had such a profound impact in re-shaping academics' conditions of work and

conditions of thought ... these are not innocuous neutral legal rational practice, rather they are instruments of new forms of governance and power ... they are designed to engender amongst academic staff new norms of conduct and professional behaviour.

The increasing tendency to subject universities and academics to performative regimes (Ball, 2000; Power, 1997) has created an institutional splinter; that is, some universities are recognised for their research capacity, whereas some universities are recognised for their teaching capacity. These are, in effect, the 'products' that offer universities opportunity to gain positional advantage. A cursory glance at any of the Ivy League universities in the northeastern United States, the Russell Group in the United Kingdom (www.russellgroup.ac.uk), or the Group of Eight in Australia (www.go8.edu.au) affirms how advantage is accumulated. Significantly too, statements that there are 'unrivalled links with business and the public sector' that appear on the Russell Group homepage (accessed 10 July 2011), or the invitation to 'do business with the Group of 8' (accessed 10 July 2011) further cements the expanding relationship between universities as knowledge producers and knowledge brokers and the business sector as knowledge consumers.

One of the unintended consequences of these divisions between universities, based on factors such as history, geography, endowment, research productivity and performance, status, prestige, selectivity and privilege, is that there is a sharp distinction drawn between research, scholarship and teaching. As universities seek to differentiate themselves in order to be positioned favourably in the market (Marginson, 2000; Shumar, 1997), their activities are brought into sharp relief. Although there may be a sense of commonality about what a university ought to be and what its contribution to knowledge creation, production and exchange should be, institutional stratification based on a reliance on the educational marketplace ultimately exposes deep divisions *within* universities. That is, some forms of academic labour are seen as more valuable and justified on the spurious grounds that it is consumer choice (consumers being benefactors, funding agencies or students). Accordingly, the educational marketplace dictate what 'goods' are deemed to be desirable and in high demand and available only to those with the necessary economic and social capital to acquire them. And the more boundaries between the state, higher education and markets become blurred, the greater the potential for markets to significantly control academic work.

It is a struggle here to imagine how the clamour for 'world class' status (Deem, Ho Mok & Lucas, 2008) and policy promises to widen participation (as evidenced in England), or draw in students from low socio-economic

backgrounds (as evidenced in Australia) can be reconciled. Furthermore, in order to demonstrate their relevance and secure more government funding, demands for increased skills and knowledge in a globalised marketplace have prompted universities to move into terrains once thought of as the domain of vocational skills and apprentice training. What is immediately evident is that a culture of 'deliverables' has been established and promoted. This is the runaway one-dimensional world of which we speak.

As the creation, production and dissemination of knowledge becomes increasingly influential in the globalised world (Appadurai, 2006; Roberts & Peters, 2008), importance is placed on more collective approaches to research and the need for collaboration between disciplines, fields, sites of knowledge production as well as between academics and practitioners, academics and the professions/industry as well as academics and 'end users' (Harney & Moten, 1998). Less clear is how academics negotiate their own spaces within these agendas to pursue and protect their scholarly interests. This might not be possible or permissible in a modernised university that seeks to preserve its own market share through an emphasis on making outputs calculable rather than memorable. Inevitably, academic values such as independence, autonomy, intellectual authority as well as prestige and status come into direct conflict with external demands for accountability, transparency, entrepreneurialism and economic regeneration. The cumulative effects of these new demands are:

- exponential pressures on time, workload and academic activities;
- an increased emphasis on performance, productivity and accountability that has led to changing work patterns;
- expanding requirements to pursue private sector funds and undertake consultancies and applied research;
- cultural shifts within universities as they seek opportunities for entrepreneurship, commercialisation and internationalisation;
- centralisation of administrative tasks and activities while there is a devolution of management and accountability to schools, departments and individuals;
- disproportionate numbers of women concentrated in lower levels of the academic hierarchy; and
- disconnection between academics and universities as a result of the pressure to offer specialised courses and meet the insistent demands of the educational marketplace.

These demands have essentially altered academic work and what it means to engage in productive academic work that is valued, recognised and

rewarded. Alongside these changes has been the dramatic transformation of students from apprentices and potential citizens to consumers of a product. Consequently, universities as well as academic staff have been positioned as merchants; education has been commodified and specialised skills and knowledge that academics possess have become marketable commodities. It has become, as Reid (1996) has suggested, a choice between two unattractive alternatives – higher education or education for hire? And while it might appear, on the surface at least, that universities have much to gain from the commercialisation of the sector as well as the entrepreneurial opportunities that are presented (Henkel, 2000), it is a Faustian exchange. The gains might well be efficiency, effectiveness and economic growth, but the cost is low staff morale, low staff retention, a devaluing of academic work and a sense of institutional loss as finance and policy officers take a larger role in university governance and management. Universities ought to ask serious questions about their underlying role and purpose. This is the 800 years of history that cannot, and should not, be crossed out with one stroke of a neo-liberal pen.

Policy and contextual changes in higher education as well as academic work can be linked with the corporatisation of the university (Bok, 2003; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Marginson & Considine, 2000). Although there can be little doubt external actors and agencies have had a direct effect on introducing changes to the higher education sector (see here Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2002), less understood has been the role and agency of internal actors (such as academics, administrative staff, governing councils and students) in the institutionalisation of these changes. In other words, there has been an *active* co-operation between external and internal actors and agents in the changing nature of higher education and academic work.

My attention then in this opening chapter is turned towards exploring the complex interplay between higher education reform and academic work. My analysis suggests that changes introduced through the ‘reform agenda’ have produced new structures, new institutional and global pressures and new technologies of control. In response to these unrelenting pressures, universities as well as academics have responded in two particular ways; one response has been to conform to the demands of new public management (Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007) and the other has been to resist what Aronowitz (2000) has termed the ‘knowledge factory’ of the corporate university.

The changing nature of academic work and identity, as well as the fault lines of change that universities are experiencing permeate the chapters of

this book. Our interest is in the tracing the impact of the knowledge society with its insistent emphasis on knowledge production, knowledge management and consumptive practices on academic work and identity. Or is it that academics have been re-positioned and re-constituted as the new knowledge workers (Deem, 2004) in a modernised and globalised workforce and that it is long overdue that we speak back to the commodification of knowledge and consumer sovereignty? We take then as our starting point Gaita's plea for universities to 'resist their times' (2000, p. 42) and move away from thinking about the services they can perform and the products they can produce, to thinking about the values that they represent.

THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

Academics inhabit institutions of higher education that have long histories of tradition and privilege. Academics have belonged to a largely independent scholarly community that maintains and powerfully defends characteristics such as intellectual freedom and autonomy, collegial authority, the responsibility for shaping the professions and professional work and a strong emphasis on the governance, management and administration of their own institutions. Certainly, as Perkin (1969) pointed out, these levels of autonomy, stability and traditions are linked with the status of universities as purveyors of knowledge. Accordingly, this offers a partial explanation for the oligarchic control that academics have traditionally been able to exercise. Without idealising the past or seeking to evoke nostalgic feelings, it is fair to suggest that eight centuries of history have almost been discounted in the recent erosion of academic work and identity. In little more than two decades, higher education has become contested policy space (Ball, 2010; Henkel, 2000). Scholarly values have been eroded as a direct result of the audit and regulation of universities and academic work which have in turn produced heightened competition, an emphasis on the educational marketplace, output driven systems, devolution, the growth of corporate governance and management and the contraction of financial resources (Deem, 2004). Put simply, what has occurred in a relatively short-time period is that universities and academic work have been modernised through the introduction and institutionalisation of centralised regulation, accountability regimes and 'new' organisational forms and practices that have been imported from the private sector (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Kolsaker, 2008; Power, 1997).

Universities in the 21st century are situated in complicated, shifting and diverse contexts. Status, competition, hierarchy and system stratification (e.g. the Ivy League universities in the USA, Russell Group in the UK and the Group of Eight in Australia), permeate the terrain of higher education. In the main, higher education policy is predominantly shaped at a national level and as such, it reflects to a greater or lesser extent, the specific traditions and circumstances of individual countries. Universities perform a range of functions and purposes such as:

- the generation, transmission and application of knowledge;
- the selection and formation of elites based on the admission to a particular degree;
- the acquisition of a qualification; and
- the social and educational development of societies and the education of professionals.

Leading universities draw status from their reputation, research performance and their ability to attract students. Furthermore, as Marginson (2007) has cogently argued, the changing global environment has altered the higher education environment. Instantaneous communications, the flow of people, ideas and resources between nations, as well as the global marketplace, have contributed to the rapid expansion of the sector. However, what has also occurred is that a global hegemony of Anglo-American universities has emerged (King, 2004), evidenced by the status, prestige, visibility and selectivity of the two-thirds of the world's top 100 universities that feature in the annual Shanghai Jiao Tong ratings. These universities compete with each other for the 'best' researchers and higher degree students, resources, benefactors, prizes, citations, sponsorship, as well as national and global dominance in the market. But has the desire to excel re-emerged as a need to compete or a drive to imitate? Might it also be the case that universities are now less sure of their own distinctive characters and influence in a world dominated by rankings, checklists and global markets?

In the past two decades, universities across Europe, the USA, Australasia and Asia have embarked on a significant re-structuring process to enhance their local, national and global competitiveness and hierarchical positioning (Dill & Soo, 2005). University ranking and league tables, as well as other quality assurance mechanisms (Roberts & Peters, 2008), are becoming increasingly influential in shaping how contemporary universities are governed, the core activities they undertake and the identity/identities they promote (Bok, 2003). What has occurred over a protracted period of time is

that governance and management structures have assumed a higher level of importance and individual academic power and responsibility has diminished. Academics, located in strong, self-regulating scholarly communities or fields of knowledge, in which they develop and consolidate their intellectual values and a sense of meaning and self-worth, are gradually being re-positioned. New modes of governance and management, as well as regulation, accreditation and funding have impacted on what knowledge should be produced and how knowledge production should be organised. Furthermore, institutional or system-wide changes that have occurred as a result of increasing policy imperatives that require universities to demonstrate their competitiveness, sustainability and viability, have changed what it means to be an academic and engage in academic work (Henkel, 2000). This top-down implementation of structural change has simultaneously centralised power and devolved blame, as individual departments are rendered responsible and accountable for cost minimisation, quality assurance, targets, consumer satisfaction and increased productivity.

Across the shifting landscape of higher education, the traditions of academic work and academic identity have become increasingly fragmented and eroded. The development of mass higher education and growing demands for knowledge workers with requisite skills for a modernised and globalised world has dramatically altered the academic profession. Universities no longer house what has been traditionally been small and selected groups of academics in disciplines. Insistent demands for highly qualified workers to contribute to the knowledge economy now means that research, scholarship, teaching, consultancy and academic citizenship have become mass occupations and consequently schools, departments and faculties have exploded in the size and diversity of academic programs. What has occurred therefore, in a relatively short period of time, is that there has been a shift towards direct intervention in the role and purpose of universities as well as academic staff. Policy changes in the USA, the UK, Australia and New Zealand have played a stronger strategic role in the development of research and higher education (Deem & Brehony, 2005). Consequently, there has been a marked increase in the representation of external interests in the governance of universities and engaging in research by academics has become increasingly conditional on securing external funding (Trowler, 1998).

Burton Clark (1998) drew attention to the rapid growth of academic knowledge within existing disciplines as well as new disciplines (such as tourism, creative arts, osteopathy and gaming) that have been established as

a direct result of student demand. Although these new forms of knowledge stimulate a demand for research and intellectual development, new disciplines can increase competition between academics for scarce resources and expand opportunity for separate, and the separation of, departments, schools and faculties. Although academics are located in disciplines or discrete scholarly fields, students do not necessarily fall neatly into disciplinary compartments. Consequently one contemporary problem that universities face is the re-structuring of curriculum around external (consumer) demands. Not only does this require a fundamental shift in thinking about research and teaching, but issues of interdisciplinary and cross-discipline studies directly confront issues of academic territory and independence. There has been a partial breakdown of traditional disciplinary structures that now permits university managers to re-allocate resources and shift priorities according to the demands of the market.

One of the notable changes in the past two decades is that universities have become more transparent, more accountable and more responsive to its community, the professions and industries (Marginson, 2000). Although universities are cognisant of the need to be responsive to contemporary conditions and aware of the communities that they serve, being 'useful' has been configured as being business-like to the point of being a business. Corporatisation has become inevitable (Birnbaum, 2001). Are universities thus in danger of ceasing to be universities as they adopt corporate practices and become corporate entities?

The trend towards more entrepreneurial styles of university operation (Roberts & Peters, 2008) has placed pressure on the notion that differentiation and status are hallmarks of an academic authority. Members of an academic community who can demonstrate their value (i.e. financial worth) accumulate and receive various rewards, status and resources more frequently and unevenly than their colleagues. Furthermore, there is an increasing emphasis on academic teams for both research and teaching activities (Marginson, 2010). Conveniently, these teams create the possibility of a homogenised environment for the assessment of performance (at individual, collective and organisational levels) as well as the distribution of funds to support these activities. Academic work can then be allocated according to centrally determined priorities and these academic teams are required to be both responsive and flexible to changing environmental conditions. One of the more subtle ramifications of 'teams' is that they can act to regulate individuals and peers in their adoption of discourses such as 'best practice', 'collaborative effort' or 'team goals'. Although we do not

disagree with the notion of collaborative work practices, collective decision-making and the sharing of ideas across a scholarly community, teams have metamorphosed to become an institutional tool to achieve strategic objectives. Accordingly, the role of the individual as an actor and agent is increasingly diminished in the corporate environment of the university. Yet, paradoxically, the university is fixated on the individual and their contribution, productivity, esteem and 'strategic worth' (Bok, 2003; May, 2005).

We recognise that our perspectives of the policy context of higher education are predominantly linked with our location in universities in Australia and England. Nevertheless, what is immediately apparent is that the past three decades have been a period of accelerated transformation of the academy and academic work. It is precisely these policy reforms that have raised questions about the nature of universities and academic work and the changing relationship between the state, the market and universities (Enders & de Weert, 2009; Marginson & Considine, 2000). In this climate, only two viable alternatives are possible. The first opportunity is for academics to re-invent themselves in the image of the 'success culture' that new managerialism demands (May, 2005) or secondly academics who do not conform to managerial imperatives are regulated to ensure compliance.

Numerous commentators have suggested that the university is in crises (see here the work of Barnett, 2000; Exworthy & Halford, 1999; Peters & Roberts, 1999; Roberts & Peters, 2008; Smith & Webster, 1997). This crisis is directly related to the emergence in the 1980s of a set of values, policies and practices that were based on neo-liberal principles that expressed a concomitant failure of government and commitment to free-market solutions. Accordingly, across a number of Anglophone countries, universities were modernised. In the first instance, this has involved the introduction of new forms of corporate managerialism and the replication of private sector management styles (Blackmore & Sachs, 2000). Secondly, accountability structures, the implementation of delegated authority, the creation of manager-academics (Deem, 2004), combined with the requirement for strategic plans, performance monitoring, risk assessment and management, organisational responsiveness and financial viability has resulted in a focus on efficiency, productivity and accountability. Thirdly, student fees, student loans, central cost drivers, diversification of funding sources, demands for links between universities and industry, has forced universities to compete with each other in the educational marketplace (Peters & Roberts, 1999; Roberts & Peters, 2008). The net effect of these radical changes is that university courses have been commodified,