THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE UNIVERSITY AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL ACTOR AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE UNIVERSITY AS AN INSTITUTION: REFLECTIONS ON THE CASE OF AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

While the university as an institution is a great success story, one hears the constant chatter of the crises in higher education usually associated with the organizational transformation of universities. Regardless of one's normative assessment of these observations, the institutional success of the university has been accompanied by the emergence of universities as organizational actors. I reflect on how these changes could alter the university as an institution, using the Australian higher education sector as an example. In doing so, I explore how universities as organizational actors, in responding to the demands of their external environment, set in motion a series of changes that redefine highly institutionalized categories, and, in doing so, radically remake the university as an institution.

Keywords: University; institution; actor; Australia; enterprise; organization

University Collegiality and the Erosion of Faculty Authority
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INTRODUCTION

Through its institutional history, the university's mission expanded. For Cardinal Newman (1893, p. ix), a university is "a place of teaching universal knowledge" whose mission is "the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement", and, therefore, there was no place for research in the university. The modern research university, first emerged in Germany, came to encompass both advanced teaching and research (Clark, 2006; Flexner, 1930/1994; Wellmon, 2015). Later, the American variant embedded the research university into society, opening universities up to broader swathes of society and their practical needs (Cole, 2009; Kerr, 2001; Ramirez, 2006a), entrenching the tripartite mission of the university: education, research, and impact or engagement (see, e.g., Douglas, 2016). The socially embedded university (Ramirez, 2020) has gone global and has become the basis for the ubiquitous global rankings of universities, which now include "impact" (see *Times Higher Education*'s Impact Rankings 2022 incidentally topped by Western Sydney University in Australia).[1]

The expansion of higher education has been nothing short of transformative (Schofer et al., 2021). All indicators attest to the global success of the university. Everywhere universities have multiplied, and enrollments have grown (Frank & Meyer, 2020; Schofer & Meyer, 2005; Pineda, 2023, Vol. 86). As national systems transition from the elite, mass, and, in some cases, to universal phase (Trow, 1970, 1973), higher education becomes increasingly a routine feature of one's "lifelong learning," for example, as reflected in the Australian government's earnest push for "micro-credentialing" especially during and after the COVID pandemic.[2] Incorporating more and more knowledge domains and societal roles and ways of performing those roles into its boundaries, the university as a global institution has been a great success story.

Paralleling these developments, the university as social organization has undergone a dramatic change. To borrow Clark Kerr's (2001, p. 31; see also Marginson, 2016) wonderful metaphors, the university, once a "village with its priests" as a place of teaching and learning, became an "industrial town" with the incorporation of research, which evolved into a "city of infinite variety" depicted in the idea of a "multiversity." This transition from a village to a city is a massive, qualitative shift, according to Kerr (2001, p. 31):

> "The Idea of a Multiversity" is a city of infinite variety. Some get lost in the city; some rise to the top within it; most fashion their lives within one of its many subcultures. There is less of a sense of community than in the village but also less of a sense of confinement. There is less sense of purpose than within the town but there are more ways to excel. There are also more retreats of anonymity – both for the creative person and the drifter. As against the village and the town, the "city" is more like the totality of civilization as it has evolved and more an integral part of it; and movement to and from the surrounding society has been greatly accelerated. As in a city, there are many separate endeavors under a single rule of law.

The multiversity is an internally heterogeneous and differentiated organization with porous boundaries, and, therefore, is not a coherent entity held together only by its belief in itself (Krücken et al., 2007). Marginson (2016, p. 25) mused that maybe there is nothing that holds together such a multiplex

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entity. Clark Kerr (Marginson, 2016, p. 27), foreshadowing what was to come later, observed the university's "name" and its reputation could serve such a purpose:

> All parties in the multiversity have an interest in the growth of institutional status … . Students want to gain access to selective institutions, and as graduates they stand to benefit from the multiversity's name. Faculty want to work in high-status universities. Industry wants to follow the research strength as well as brand power. Donors want to back a winner. University presidents guard the institutional reputation closely.

In the last few decades, in stark contrast to the older image of universities as loosely coupled, organized anarchies (Clark, 1998; Cohen et al., 1972), we have observed the transformation of universities into "complete organizations" with identity, rationality, and hierarchy (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000), giving rise to the "actorhood imperative" or the "calls for action in the name of the self" (Bloch, 2021, p. 489). Often described as the formalization and rationalization of universities (Kim et al., 2019; Ramirez, 2006a, 2006b; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013) or an organizational or managerial turn (Krücken et al., 2013; Krücken & Meier, 2006), the university becomes "an integrated, goal-oriented, and competitive entity, in which management and leadership play an ever more important role" (Krücken, 2020, p. 163). This transformation is part of the expansion of formal organization into many domains in society and the subsequent proliferation of actors (see also Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Drori et al., 2006; Hwang & Colyvas, 2020; Hwang et al., 2019).

Although the global institutionalization of the university means that universities around the world share a lot in common with one another, universities are also creatures of national systems, and there is much organizational heterogeneity. Similarly, concrete manifestations of organizational actorhood of universities could be highly variable. As universities respond to the pressures and demands from their environments, they actively engage in initiatives that alter the very nature of the university and its work in research, teaching and impact. In this paper, I reflect on how organizational actorhood precipitates the redefinition of the university in light of the experiences of Australian universities. In doing so, I hope to re-examine the changing idea of a university once again.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

When we look at the history of the Australian higher education system as presented by the historian of higher education Hannah Forsyth (2014), the success of the university and higher education is clear with the expansion occurring in the second half of the twentieth century (For the global trend, see also Schofer & Meyer, 2005). In 1857, there were only two universities in Australia (the University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne) with about 140 students. In the twenty-first century, the Australian higher education has reached the status of a high participation system. Universities Australia (2022) reported that in 2020, close to 1.5 million students studied at 39 universities across the country. 28.1 per cent of these were

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international students.[3] Australia's top 8 research-intensive universities rank highly in the global rankings.

During this period of expansion, the character of Australian universities has changed as well. Marginson and Considine (2000, pp. 3–9) used the term, the enterprise university, to capture the "main features of the new kind of higher education institution" and a "new phase in the history of the university," which involved "the remaking or replacement of collegial or democratic forms of governance with structures that operationalise executive power" (p. 9). Describing the managerial transformation of universities, particularly the rise of the university's administration as the central locus of decision-making and power, they announced that "[f]orms of university governance and academic work that survived previous restructures are now under more direct assault" (p. 3).

In the last 20 years, Australian universities have become even more hierarchical and managerial, creating a clear "division between the top layer of university government and the rest of the university community" (Forsyth, 2014, p. 131). Forsyth (2014) traced back the development of the centralized, hierarchical managerial structure of Australian universities to deregulation and the subsequent proliferation of rules that replaced direct state control with a different monitoring and accountability structure. The new system gave more autonomy to universities and concentrated executive power in the role of Vice-Chancellor (VC) who was to be held accountable. The increasing size of universities, the growing complexity of compliance requirements as well as the on-going incorporation of societal demands have led to what Forsyth (2014, p. 125) called "the DVC (deputy vice-chancellor) epidemic."

A generic DVC used to support the VC. As universities respond to their growing number of external stakeholders and societal demands, however, new roles are created, resulting in an increasingly more elaborate division of specialized labor at the top of the organizational hierarchy. DVC of Research & Enterprise at UNSW Sydney, for instance, provides strategic leadership and support to the Vice-Chancellor and President in the generation of external research income and improving UNSW's overall research performance, and in attracting and retaining outstanding academic staff.[4]

DVC of Research & Enterprise leads the Division of Research with three Pro Vice-Chancellors or PVCs (in Research, Research Infrastructure, and Research Training). The latest addition, with a heightened emphasis on societal impact (and equity, diversity, and inclusion or EDI), is the DVC for EDI to run and manage the new division specializing in EDI (for an overview of the development of EDI/DIE within contemporary universities, please see Lee & Ramirez, 2023, Vol. 86).

The rise and expansion of the upper echelon of the university's leadership centered on the VC role reflect the concrete manifestation of university actorhood in Australia – that is, the emergence of the university's administration as a locus of decision and action. Therefore, fundamental to understanding what is happening in Australian universities is the university's leadership which interprets and responds to external pressures and trends and, in doing so, shapes

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the organizational reality and conditions of academic work. Marginson and Considine (2000, p. 8) observed:

> In recent years there has been a concentration of decision-making at the point of institutional management and leadership. Certain decisions once made by national or state government, about resource deployment for example, have been transferred to the universities themselves. Other decisions once made by academic units are now determined from above by professional managers and technicians. Many see this concentration of nodal power as overdue, as essential to the effective running of universities in the manner of government departments or business firms. Others see it as the primary cause of what they perceive as a crisis of university purposes and values.

While the emergence of the university's administration is a global phenomenon, the extent of executive power and the degree to which that power is exercised vary significantly across national higher education systems. Regardless of one's view of the desirability of this development, however, university actorhood, at least as it manifests itself in Australia, entails several important implications for not just collegiality but also for the transformation of the university as an institution regarding the core missions of the university and how they are achieved.

Even at the time of the publication of *The Enterprise University* (Marginson & Considine, 2000), some of these trends were clear. University leaders and administrators were managers well-versed in "a language imported from the corporate world" (Connell, 2019, p. 125; Hil et al., 2021). Marginson and Considine (2000, p. 9) described them as "generic rather than localised managers" managing "according to 'good practice.'" While seeking or enjoying "operational separation from the internal context," Marginson and Considine (2000, pp. 9–11) further reported, "[w]ithout exception the university leaders in our study saw collegial forms of decision-making as an obstacle to managerial rationalities." This view for collegial governance is consistent with "a discernible decline" they observed in the role of the academic disciplines in governance. The disciplines, and the collegial culture and network which sustain them, are often seen as a nuisance by executive managers and outside policy-makers.

The new centralized, hierarchical structure, then, has installed a new managerial class at the organizational echelon that is culturally distinct from the rest of the university or at least the academic staff. One indicator of the rise of this administrative or managerial class in Australian universities is the size of remuneration packages offered to university leaders. One figure from 2012 showed that the 20 highest paid VC in Australia collectively earned $18 million (Forsyth, 2014). The relatively high executive compensation in Australia perhaps speaks to where on the scale of "corporateness" Australian universities fall. For instance, Michael Spence, the current President and Provost of University College London was the highest paid VC in Australia at AU$1.6 million during his tenure at Sydney University before he took a "pay cut of more than 50 per cent" for his current position.[5] Finally, the fact that the current VC whose highly successful career includes stints as the education secretary in New South Wales and the managing director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation "is not a scholar and does not have a doctorate" says a lot about the role of VC in Australian universities.[6]

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While the division between the top echelon of the university hierarchy and the rest at Australian universities seems clear, the constitution of the rest has been changing as well. One of the striking trends, paralleling the "decline of the faculties" in university governance, is the changing composition of university personnel. For instance, Forsyth (2014, p. 138) reported that at the Australian Catholic University, the number of students increased by 56 per cent between 2008 and 2013. During the same period, the academic staff grew only by 24 per cent, while the general staff by 67 per cent. Croucher and Woelert (2022, pp. 166–167), analyzing the data on university workforce in Australia from 1997 to 2017, painted a more complex picture:

> [T]he proportion of non-academic staff of universities' overall workforce (FTE) remained remarkably stable, remaining close to 57% if excluding and close to 55% if including casual staff over the entire period. This stability is despite the fact that universities' overall workforce grew by around 50% (full-time or part-time staff only) or close to 60% if including casual staff.

What really changed was the composition of non-academic staff. In broad strokes, "there has been a striking and uniform growth in management-rank positions, concurrent with a substantial decline in lower-level and less expansive support roles" (Croucher & Woelert, 2022, p. 159).

The changing composition reflects the professionalization of non-academic workforce in universities. From technology transfer and research management to financial administration and student affairs, it is common to find highly qualified non-academic professionals on university campuses (for instance, see Beerkens, 2013, for the case of research management). This is a particular type of professionalization in which managerial knowledge and experiences in the corporate sector are highly valued, however (see Hwang & Powell, 2009, for a similar development in the US non-profit sector). Croucher and Woelert (2022, p. 172) observed that:

> [M]anagerial techniques and solutions originating in the corporate sector become seen to be readily applicable to universities … leading to a proliferation of management-focused non-academic staff roles over time as one key element of a broader "corporate" transformation of academic and non-academic work processes at Australian universities.

They concluded that in Australia "the legitimate ideas of the university as a specific, academically focused institution has largely given way to the notion of the university being an organization like any other" in what they termed "a broader 'corporate' transformation of academic and non-academic work processes at Australian universities" (Croucher & Woelert, 2022, p. 172). All in all, academics, now, have less support, but more paper work.

In this context, the university as an institution begins to lose its distinctiveness. In this new corporatized campus, with the inflow of managerial professionals, many institutionalized features of the university begin to change. Tensions surface in universities, arising from the convergence of conflicting logics and values. For instance, in an effort to save on rent, one Australian university announced that it will introduce "hot-desking," "ejecting academics from their own offices where they meet with students and store their large book collections."[7] Academics, in turn, are unhappy about the decision. It is not just that offices for academics will

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disappear, but the decision will alter faculty–student interactions and relationships. Certainly, there will be fewer books on university campuses, transforming – perhaps undermining – what we associate with the university.

Changes are also directed at other taken-for-granted features of the university such as students, academics, courses, research, disciplines, etc. (Meyer et al., 2007). One of the more recent developments at the heart of the university's institutional core, driven from the very top of the organizational hierarchy as part of strategic initiatives, is the increasing differentiation of academic roles especially at, but not limited to, research-intensive universities. The creation and expansion of the teaching- or education-focused academic roles mean unbundling of research and teaching (Bennett et al., 2018; Crossley, 2021; Godbold et al., 2022a; Goodman et al., 2020).

The expansion of the education-focused academic role is not limited to Australia, as observed in the rise of teaching/education-focused roles in the United Kingdom, the United States, and in Canada (Probert, 2015). Data from the Department of Education, according to Bennett et al. (2018, p. 272), suggest a rapid growth of teaching- or education-focused academics in Australia: 339 per cent from 2007 to 2016. Rogers and Swain (2022, p. 1048), based on more recent data from the Department of Education, reported that "the number of full-time and fractional full-time teaching-only positions increased from 1163 to 4988 FTE … In the same period, the number of research-only positions increased by 2449 FTE," while the number of positions that combine research and teaching increased from 26,840 to 27,507. The data suggest that the rise of the "education-focused" academic role has been going on for quite some time. After a brief break during the COVID pandemic, the pace has picked up again. For instance, my own university started its own, "Education-focused career model" driven from the top in 2017, and the number of "EF community members" has grown to 400 since.

The factors driving this development are many, including the increasing demand for higher education in Australia due to the massification of higher education and the importance of international students for Australian universities as well as heightened competition over resources and rankings (Probert, 2015). These factors still exist, and, therefore, the trend will likely continue. The change process has not been smooth, however. One of the few studies that examined the introduction of the education-focused model in Australia reports:

> [T]he uncertainty surrounding career paths for teaching academics, who noted the absence of career or promotion scripts. Respondents noted also an absence of role models within the professoriate. They expressed widespread concerns about developing the traditional academic skills required to transition between roles and institutions. (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 272)

Despite the difficulties associated with the introduction of a new model, universities are committed. My own university, for example, has created (1) a support structure around the community of practice for education-focused academics and provided (2) professional development opportunities and resources (Whitton et al., 2022).

The rise of the education-focused academic role means fewer and fewer teaching–research combined academics and contributes directly to the decline

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of the "tripartite role of academics in teaching, research and service activities" (Macfarlane, 2011, p. 59). It is not clear that the combined or balanced academics will become extinct, but the current trends and the rationale for the introduction of this new model suggest a sea change and a different approach to academic work. Bruce Macfarlane (2011, p. 59; see Crossley, 2021, for a view against the "all-rounders" model) argued that "all-round academics" that combined "all elements of academic practice are being displaced by 'para-academics'… who specialise in one element of the tripartite academic role."

The rise of "para-academics" parallels broader changes in the composition of university personnel, particularly the inflow of managerial and other professionals into universities. In the context of increasing differentiation of academic roles, we have also seen the proliferation of education design professionals. They do not teach in classrooms themselves or do research on any substantive areas – other than pedagogy and education technology, but they promote teaching effectiveness and student experience by supporting academics. Designers view academics as "content providers" and approach teaching in a highly standardized way with a view toward making content more relevant and accessible to students (e.g., shorter and fewer readings, multimedia contents, more authentic assessments and activities, etc.). However, the pursuit of improved teaching and better learning outcomes in this way diminishes disciplinary distinctiveness and emphasizes practical knowledge and career readiness. Academics are not mere "content providers," but are knowledge producers embedded in disciplinary communities with different cultures, practices and routines. Education-focused academics are both expert teachers and researchers of teaching (or scholar of learning and teaching), and, some have argued, are in the process of development of a "hybrid teacher-academic developer identity" (Godbold et al., 2022b, p. 1). The centrality and meaning of teaching vary across these groups.

These developments diversify the academic workforce and introduce tensions among the diverse set of colleagues. Macfarlane (2011, p. 63) suggested that there are two routes to becoming para-academics. Support staff see their roles upskilled by the addition of activities while academics see their roles "deskilled from all-round academics." At any rate, all-round academics lose much autonomy and authority, especially in teaching and other areas being claimed by para-academics, as the education-focused academic role becomes institutionalized in the university hierarchy.

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY NOW?

The societal centrality of higher education and the university as its institutional embodiment are nicely captured in the metaphors of sieve, incubator, temple, and hub (Stevens et al., 2008). The university offers something for everyone, as Clark Kerr suggested in his notion's of the multiversity. While the important societal roles performed by universities have become highly institutionalized, this success has been accompanied by the transformation of the university into an organizational actor. In this context, Marginson and Considine (2000, pp. 6 –7) argument about Australia and the "Enterprise University" was prescient:

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> [T]he Australian case is distinguished not because higher education here is different from the rest, but because in Australia the common global trends showed themselves rather early, and have been carried further and more consistently than in many places. As such, the Australian case might provide other nations with a forecast – and a warning – of where the common pattern is taking them.

Marginson and Considine (2000, p. 5) argued that the Enterprise University's mission is its own prestige and competitiveness, and other matters including academic identities are "subordinated to the mission, marketing and strategic development of the institution and its leaders." Perhaps the motivation for the two *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* volumes devoted to collegiality and the whole genre of literature deploring the dire state of higher education and universities in crisis around the world are the proof. The transformation of universities into organizational actors has the potential to undermine the university as an institution or at least to change it substantially.

In this paper, I have reflected on the organizational transformation, particularly the rise of the university administration as the locus of decision and action, which itself is a major institutional change and has further consequences for institutional change in universities. The rise of the education-focused academic role as a category at the expense of the traditional, all-round academics changes the nature of academic work and the meanings and practices of the academic profession. This is a result of the university leadership's strategic decision to improve productivity, efficiency, and quality.

A larger point is that universities, recast as organizational actors, could potentially alter the university as an institution. Maybe this is just the nature of the institution that stood the test of time by responsively incorporating ever-changing societal demands. The institutional success of the university has obscured this aspect. The changing knowledge content is a good example. Critical and liberal education is being displaced by practical and skill-based knowledge. The usefulness of useless knowledge carries less and less currency in contemporary universities (Flexner, 2017; Ordine, 2017). This is reflected at the university level in terms of disciplinary representation. Arts and humanities have been disappearing; maybe some social sciences will follow. In response to the COVID-induced crisis, my own university merged three faculties (Arts and Social Sciences, Art and Design, and Built Environment) to form a new faculty of Arts, Design, and Architecture. (Note that social sciences is not even included in the name of the new faculty.) The Business School came out more or less unscathed. One could say it was the triumph of job readiness over the pursuit of beauty, truth, and meaning of life. A more neutral observation would be the withering away of the disciplines. Chad Wellmon (2015) in his book *Organizing Enlightenment*, documented the historical emergence of the research university in Germany and its organization along disciplinary lines. The current development may be the beginning of the last chapter in that history. If disciplines are in danger, the look of the university will fundamentally change.

The rise of impact is another area in which the university is changing, particularly as it relates to research. Scholars used to think about engagement or impact as a third mission after research and teaching. This may be a little premature, but there is a growing tendency to redefine the ultimate purpose and value of research

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and teaching in terms of impact. So if we think about the historical evolution of the university from teaching to research and beyond. Is the current obsession with impact a harbinger of what's to come? Is the impact university replacing the research university? Many Australian universities are currently incorporating or integrating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into everything they do from operation to teaching and research. If the impact rankings published by *Times Higher Education* are any indication, Australian universities are doing great. Universities and science have been and should continue to be an important part of the collective fight against climate change. However, I have a strong suspicion that *Times Higher Education*'s impact rankings have something do with this development. Moreover, the university as an organizational actor tends to have an evaluative stance on these sorts of things, turning everything into a performance metric, and academics are increasingly encouraged to integrate SDGs into their teaching and research. There is a push back particularly from the research side of the university and faculty. The struggle is not really about whether universities should have a role in this, but about academic freedom, an important ingredient of the university as an institution. Should impact define research? Or should they be loosely coupled? The construction of the university as an actor has potential to redefine radically the university as an institution. Therefore, the question, again, is: What is a university?

NOTES

1. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings
2. According to OECD's (2021, p. 2) report on the extent of micro-credentials among its jurisdictions, "[m]ost definitions of micro-credentials denote an organised learning activity with an associated credential – the credential recognises a skill or competency that has been acquired through an organised learning process and validated through an assessment. Consequently, the term 'micro-credential' is commonly understood to refer to both the credential itself and the education or training programme which leads to the credential award."
3. https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/220207-HE-Facts-and-Figures-2022_2.0.pdf
4. https://www.unsw.edu.au/about-us/our-story/governance-leadership
5. https://www.smh.com.au/national/are-heads-of-australian-universities-worth-a-million-dollars-20201120-p56gga.html
6. https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/mark-scott-to-be-next-vice-chancellor-of-sydney-university-20210312-p57a2h.html
7. https://www.smh.com.au/education/uni-hot-desking-plan-expected-to-save-11-million-20211208-p59fqz.html

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