Agnosis in the university workplace

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One significant, tangible and interesting challenge for the privatised university is its impedance of particular forms of effective engagement and action in teaching and research, notably with respect to inequities in the broader social context, and the position of the university within that context. In the face of significant resource constraints (themselves the outcome of complex political and economic dynamics) intersecting organisational imperatives toward competition, administrative accountability, unilateral managerial style and 'best foot forward' promotional culture combine to produce a particular lack in socio-political epistemology, referred to here as bad faith 'not-knowing', or ignorance. A central paradox is that, although the university is evidently devoted to knowledge production and dissemination, and the various issues the sector faces in Australia are well documented (notably: casualisation, ever diminishing research funding, and the implications of the massification of teaching), nonetheless, the general tendency is towards acquiescence and intensification rather than contestation of the processes that give rise to these issues. This not-knowing arises at the intersection of the dissonant and incompatible voices that frame the institution as a workplace: the top-down managerial line and its commitment to control through 'cost neutrality', the outward-facing advertorial rhetoric of excellence, and the routine snark of the embattled workforce attempting to harmonise these discrepant formulations of the organisation. It is argued that this empty space of not-knowing is recognisable to people occupying roles in other organisations, and that it represents therefore a peculiar opportunity for those interested in the future of universities as public institutions: there is more to find out about how these organisationally produced epistemic limits are recognisable and consequential across contexts, how they are imposed, and how they contain potential.

Keywords: agnotology, new public management, critical university studies, neoliberalism, organisational culture, academic labour

The following paper presents an argument assembled via observations regarding university workplaces, which will be quite recognisable to readers familiar with the Australian academic context. If the argument transpires to be an interesting one, perhaps the most interesting thing about it might be how easy it is to substantiate, and following on from that, the question as to why, given what is known and knowable about universities, they seem generally to trundle along in much the same direction. It is not likely that this latter question could be answered just here, and it may be that it is a sort of pseudo-question. Perhaps in the limited space available we could, however, reflect on what such an answer would consist of, and what it might entail. If there is something wrong with the premises of the question, contemplating that might also prove instructive, as it would seem to invite consideration of the role played in university workplace culture by the discrepancy between public proclamation and everyday practice. As Bourdieu memorably put it: 'practice has a logic which is not that of logic' (1998, p. 82). This discrepancy or occlusion, common to many workplaces, is especially intriguing in universities, given their apparent function as institutional sites for producing knowledge and making it available.

I present this argument here for the following reasons: it might entertain readers to remember again their social and organisational context and how they might evaluate their priorities in that context; it might instantiate

grounds for forthright consideration of the role played by commitments to scholarship, conservatively defined, and the cultural and political role of 'critique' more broadly in universities; and it might clarify how specific economic and political logics play out in academic institutions, and as such, how they relate to the policy frameworks (and the effectiveness and appropriateness of such frameworks) driving and governing formal practice in universities.

The argument in brief is that the principal challenge facing the privatised university is that its organisational culture is not really helping the people who work there to do intelligent things. On the contrary, the organisational culture of the university leads its occupants to behave in accordance with a peculiar combination of ignorance and bad faith, produced in and through the aporia mentioned above. This vocabulary of ignorance and bad faith, elaborated below, should not be understood in a dismissive or derogatory sense. The formulation is somewhat clumsy, but there does not seem to be an alternate term or phrase at hand which effectively captures the conjunction. The suggestion is that, as ever, it is interesting to think about what we don't know and how we don't know it, and interesting especially to think about what we don't know about how and why universities work, how they could work, and how we might like them to work (or how we might like to work in them).

Some commentators, as we shall see presently, are inclined to think of this production of ignorance and bad faith in a rather conspiratorial fashion, as though the system were designed by our cryptic overlords to befuddle us in the pursuit of some … thing. Although it does indeed serve the interests of powerful people to have universities organised in this way, this unhappy accident is probably not really of much consequence to those powerful people. University personnel and their 'mission' do not pose a threat to the status quo: they play an important role in upholding it. More pertinently for the argument at hand, the conspiratorial model gives undue credit to the capacity of human intention to consciously (albeit 'remotely') steer a complex and porous social organisation like a university in a definitively meaningful way. Such steerage could however be caustically disruptive in its consequences: the argument advanced here can be considered with this speculation in mind.

In part because there is now an extensive literature in 'critical university studies' (zombieacademy, 2010), it is sensible at the outset to sketch preliminary definitions, and in that way furnish some background for what follows. The idea of 'the privatised university' does not really have a clear referent: it means different things to

different people. Furthermore, the idea of the privatised university travels alongside other critical descriptions of the institution: the neoliberal university, the corporate university and so on. One or another of these frameworks for running the critique will be more appealing to some than to others. Different ways of naming 'the problem' highlight some aspects of it, but in so doing, obscure others. The critiques of interest here, as the other articles in this issue attest, are concerned with particular challenges within and for the institution, although which challenges are considered most salient varies across locations and perspectives. The specification, however, invariably implies an institution or organisation that has been through a process to get to the state it is now in (the process of privatisation, corporatisation, neoliberalisation or whatever it was). By inference, it was in some other state before this process commenced, and therefore could be in some further, unspecified or perhaps even desirable state in future. Certainly, it won't be in this state forever.

Readers will be familiar with the broader context, which has also been very well rehearsed. Some people like to use the word 'neoliberalism' as shorthand. There are usually two steps here. The opening gambit is the assertion of market fundamentalism: according to the refrain, the dominant socio-logic asserts that things are only worth doing ('investing in') if they yield an economic return. Competition guarantees efficiency, and thereby increases economic gain. Education is a private, rather than a public good (so the individual recipient should pay). Information or perhaps 'knowledge' (something seemingly relevant to universities) is rendered productive as an exchange value, rather than a use value. Individuals invest in this product to increase their own value as commodities in the labour market.

There is a picture of the world here, where an economic (really a financial) imperative has primacy and other human practices and endeavours should be subordinated to it. Economic rationalism is the ultimate sovereign, and the guarantor of 'freedom'. Of course, if one wants to weed the kale on a commune, live out in the bush or become homeless: fine (as long as there is no trespassing or leeching resources off the state). But servicing the economy is the only meaningful way to be a person. Actualisation and agency are realised through consumption. People are monadic, their behaviour is private, calculated and occurs on the basis of self-interested motivation. This perspective functions practically both as a model of rational (and morally right) action, and a disciplinary mechanism structuring institutional fields so as to entail action in accordance: rewarding action which validates and assents

to the model, and reproving, penalising, or 'developing' action otherwise. So far, so good.

The next step, which is sometimes forgotten (and the first part is certainly entertaining), usually involves something like the following points. Firstly, the social world does not really work this way, it does not seem to have worked this way for most of human history, and people do all sorts of things that are economically deeply pointless and nonrational: having children, alcoholism, going for the St. George Illawarra Dragons and so on (Graeber, 2011). *Homo economicus* is a wholly imaginary creature, and an impoverished and mean-spirited one at that. The dominant logic is really a kind of fantastic and impossible utopia, and tremendous energy is continuously expended to administer this world into its image:

> the unanswerable logic of markets, economic necessity and bottom lines becomes a new fundamentalist religion that turns organisations into a place of darkness, where emotional brutality is commonplace and different forms of psychological violence, dehumanisation, including degradation, humiliation and intimidation, have become the norm (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1142).

Secondly, and perhaps more pertinently, the ascendance of this rhetoric of economic rationalism occurs simultaneously with an unprecedented concentration of wealth: the plutonomy of the one per cent (Hardoon, 2015; Di Muzio, 2015; Piketty, 2013). For these sorts of reasons, Brenner and Theodore refer to the process which gives rise to the problems under consideration as 'actually existing neoliberalism' (2002). It is probably safe to assume that the co-incidence of neoliberal doctrine (or however we might name that) with this concentration of wealth is not fortuitous. Keeping this bigger picture in mind can have a helpfully clarifying effect in the encounter with some of the incongruities we will presently attend to.

How then, should we approach the architecture of this challenge, which is the organisational culture of the 'actually existing' Australian university? One short answer to this question might be something like this: as a public service institution, the university is not adequately funded for the work expected of it (this is before we come to any discussion of whether we think it well suited for this sort of work, or what sort of work we think it fit for in fact). This has been the case for some time and shows no signs of reversing. Among OECD countries, Australian universities come in thirty-third out of thirty-four for government funding allocated to universities as a percentage of GDP: the Australian government would have to increase current funding by almost 50 per cent just to get to the OECD average (Tiffen, 2015).

A slightly longer answer could be that the various strategies which have emerged to deal with the problem specified in the short answer are counterproductive – in fact, they have become interesting new satellite problems: the university is a kind of constellation of problems, each with its own orbit, momentum and gravitational force.

To furnish some examples: the economy of scale sought in Australian university teaching as a cost-cutting solution to that first problem seems somehow to be hitting the quality ceiling in terms of the capacity to provide a meaningful educational encounter. Student-staff ratio only goes in one direction, and it is not the preferred one (McDonald, 2013). This has implications for teaching 'quality', and by implication, for institutional reputation and market appeal. Technological 'innovation' is presented as a pedagogical salve, although it seems to further massify and anonymise that encounter, and has also facilitated the entry of edu-tech interests, funded by speculative venture capital (Watters, 2015). The implication of this is datafication and financialisation (as with the leisure pursuits of 'social media'), which is to say, student 'engagement' with technology becomes a source of monetisable data, which in turn reconfigures what will stand as evidence of learning and teaching. Students have no part in any conversation about this.

The squeeze has also led to the casualisation of academic work. This is effectively collapsing the future of the academic profession. It is well known that most teaching in Australian universities is now conducted by an academic precariat (Rea, 2012). There is a predictable gender skew here, shot through how different kinds of university work are valued and to whom they are allocated (Lynch, 2010). Permanent employment insecurity has implications for the psychological wellbeing of the university workforce (Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016). This is a widely acknowledged institutional risk (Saltmarsh & Randell-Moon, 2015). By head count, most academic staff, like most university staff, do not have ongoing positions (Lane & Hare, 2014). The minority of academics who retain such positions are ageing

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(Bexley, James & Arkoudis, 2011). The consequences of casualisation for morale and for teaching quality, and what casualisation says about the priorities for the institution and its substantive forms of work and 'outputs', are not on the agenda for public discussion. There would seem to be something of an issue with the role of university accreditation in a society purportedly committed to meritocracy where career opportunities for some of the most highly qualified people in the country are limited to sessional work.

Research is structured exclusively around hypercompetitive and continually diminishing state research grants. In formal terms successfully competing for funding is research, in that it is really the only institutionally credible assurance of recognition as 'research active' (not that such status guarantees anything intrinsically desirable). In a context otherwise subject to hearty logics of austerity, the more money a researcher can attract and spend, the better. Profligacy with research funding is the objective institutional measure of research quality. Organising research around the submission of usually unsuccessful grant applications is grossly inefficient (Graves, Barnett & Clarke, 2011), but it is also conventionally neoliberal by the parameters briefly given above: in the absence of a natural market for research 'products', competition for grants proxies for research 'excellence' (Blommaert, 2015).

The university is constituted within Byzantine, sclerotic, and deeply antidemocratic bureaucratic processes, involving a great many administrative personnel and the ritual circulation of documents marked with the proper signatures (Ginsberg, 2011). This is said to ensure transparency and appropriate oversight. Some commentators (for example, Ernst & Young, 2012) have implied that unsustainable administrative bloat may be what gives rise to the appearance of the short answer problem. Occasionally, the fabulous salaries of senior management are brought into this discussion (Hare, 2015).

All of these concrete and uncontroversial examples (and we could certainly enumerate further) contribute to the everyday fabric of university work, and are well documented in the literature. This is the context within which the observations to follow are situated. In a sense, this is all still simply circling around the possibly sensible question as to why, although all of this is known to be the case, everything seems to go on along just the same trajectory.

Sometimes the simplest answer to this question – that 'knowledge resistance' stymies effective 'knowledge transfer' where policy makers are driven by ideological agendas – seems like the right one (Schlesinger, 2013). Ideologues are in charge and don't care about facts: they don't listen to reason! Collini (2012) suggests that although people who produce higher education policy basically ignore criticism from academics, such criticism must nonetheless be repeated vociferously. That may be, but we can distinguish criticism from evidence and ought not conflate them, and so this is not entirely satisfactory. Moreover, in this way of thinking, it is somehow up to someone else, somewhere else, to stop doing what they are doing, or even to actually do something different altogether. Asking for somebody else to do something, or waiting for something to happen (under the increasingly implausible impression perhaps that doing so is the 'professional' thing to do), doesn't seem to have proved fruitful thus far.

A more sophisticated answer is that the neoliberal market form in universities can never be realised, and is rather applied selectively and to political ends: control, budget, the rhetoric of social inclusion and so on (Marginson, 2013). Here the ideologues aren't true ideologues, for they don't really even believe in the ideology themselves (and so those documenting how it can be debunked could perhaps be spending their time more productively). It does not work how it says it works: what is said and what is done are different: the 'meaning' of what is said should not be evaluated for what it says, but rather for what it does or what actions it permits or requires. It is not really certain whether the current situation is actually favoured by The Powers That Be, or merely a weird accidental outcome informed by this 'para-ideological' tinkering. This is interesting territory to explore and we shall return to it later.

It might be obvious, but perhaps it is worth pointing out just the same that one needs to take or be in some position to actually consider those aforementioned and well-documented realities as problems, or failures, or challenges, or as in some other way suitable for intervention from someone. For many people, these are matters of indifference, not least because they are recognisably rather humdrum iterations of the broader and generally disagreeable social context of contemporary work in corporate organisational cultures (Wilmott, 1993; Höpfl, 2005). It is not as though there is something unusual or exceptional about universities compared to other social locations: the processes of rationalisation and intensification customary to universities are ubiquitous, although they may occur with varying intensities in different locations. The concerns about university work can be understood primarily as the concerns of

a somewhat idiosyncratic profession in the course of being deskilled, or perhaps (in the more old-fashioned vocabulary) proletarianised.

This shift in professional autonomy is a key feature of 'new public management': the suite of managerial practices originally introduced into the public sector in the 1980s, ostensibly to increase efficiency through emphasis on outputs, competitive, contract-based provision, private sector accounting techniques, and the diffusion of responsibility (not power) across the workforce hierarchy (Hood 1995). The diminished control academic workers possess over their own labour and how it is defined and assessed highlights how new public management appropriates and subverts discourses of democratisation and public accountability. 'Objective' standards, audit and externally defined and imposed measures of performance supplant trust in the professions.

Pointing out the cultural and intellectual consequences of this collapse of trust, however, is often heard rather pithily as an indulgent complaint about being required to justify one's salary (Maltby, 2008). It can be informative to compare different professions in terms of their social closure and their capacity to defend themselves from these managerial forms: doctors, lawyers, engineers and university lecturers, for example, have all fared rather differently in terms of their capacities to retain professional autonomy and control. In developing critical arguments around these issues, it can be productive to start with the widespread indifference to the conditions of university work in mind (that is to say, the extent to which this degradation is quite unremarkable to people employed in other contexts). Doing so can to some extent mitigate the potential risks of being understood as occupying or claiming a 'victim' position which, to many, does not appear congruent with possession of a PhD, some residual occupational prestige, and a basically middle-class (though possibly downwardly mobile) status.

Descriptions of 'the university under attack' – or worse, 'the humanities' – are therefore often unhelpful, however parlous the circumstances, to the extent that they play on tacit politics of vocational identity which falsely (and perhaps somewhat disingenuously) homogenise the institution and its commitments (see, for example, Eagleton, 2015, for a particularly pompous instance of this). This is deeply alienating and antagonising to those who are unmotivated by the magical cakes of bourgeois culture and *temet nosce*. A sounder tack might be to better identify and articulate commonalities across organisational sites and working contexts. As is common in other workplaces, academics and others at universities seem increasingly to experience 'organisational disidentification' (Stiles, 2011, p. 6). The university is an institution with multiple incompatible identities – it is an MIO or 'multiple identity organisation' (Pratt & Foreman, 2000), and there is no reason to assume that any one group within the organisation speaks legitimately for or to the interests of any other, or indeed that the organisation could be brought together under any one sign. This is precisely the charge often laid at the door of the managerial elite by academics, who in so doing perpetrate exactly the same identitarian manoeuvre, albeit espousing a formulation that better serves their own interests.

In a distinct idiom to that of MIOs, Cris Shore published a paper in 2010 titled 'Beyond the multiversity', riffing on Clark Kerr's coinage. The multiversity, Shore argues,

> is not the death of the traditional liberal idea of the university so much as a shift to a new multi-layered conception in which universities are now expected to serve a plethora of different functions, social and symbolic as well as economic and political. Government no longer conceptualises universities primarily as sites for reproducing national culture, or educating people for citizenship or equipping individuals with a broad, critical liberal education. Rather, it expects universities to produce all of these plus its agenda for enhancing economic importance, its focus on commercialisation of knowledge, and its goals for social inclusion (2010, p. 19).

The university, the implication seems to be, cannot please all of the people all of the time. Shore's position is notable because he does not describe the imminent demise of some particular sacred totem, as though there were one, unitary, overarching logic, but rather, a kind of burying alive of this totem alongside and under a whole range of other expectations and demands. The university as MIO becomes manifest at the juncture where all these expectations and demands sediment in such a way as to produce tangible contradiction. Organisational fragmentation obviously has implications for the identity work conducted by members of the organisation, compounding the constraints the core activities of the organisation are already subject to.

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It is then not only that the university is not resourced to meet the demands placed upon it from without; it is that it is, in addition, internally incommensurable: it cannot simultaneously be the same place apparently indexed by the various activities and accounts intended for and emanating from within. The organisation talks past itself. In the interests of brevity, we can review the locus of occlusion briefly here.

At a broad or general scale, there is the relentless, asinine and sanitised hyperbole of university marketing, which is expensive but also, unfortunately, patently transparent to anyone subjected to it. This is a kind of amplified noise that tends to distort and undermine the possibilities of a more thoughtful signal of the sort people might hope to encounter from universities, an aggressive reiteration of the predictably vacuous language of 'excellence', 'impact', 'ranking' and 'world class' which is oddly both aspirational (where we are always going) and factive (kudos to us, we are already there!).

This is combined with a rigidly hierarchical, top-down managerial culture, quite incongruent with the packaging and PR, under which staff are to understand themselves as cost centres: accounting objects which consume resources, must constantly justify their presence, and can be moved around the organisation in whatever way seems most cost effective (Gabriel, 2012). Sometimes an odd commitment to the pretence of participatory governance is exhibited; with direct and generally publicly unquestioned authority softened by quaint and velvety rituals of 'consultation' and 'feedback', although essentially decision-making is vertical, slippery and opaque. Universities exhibit an admirably dogged commitment to styles of managerial control which are, according to even mainstream management theory, anathema to productive working environments (De Vita & Case, 2014).

Running in counterpoint with these disharmonious leading voices of the institution is the back chatter and gallows humour of the staff: demoralised, silenced, tenacious, isolated, cynical, often uncertain and acutely attuned to any shift in tone from management which might harbour a threat. This is sometimes practised as a grim, passive realpolitik, as though the smartest thing to do is nothing but hope to hold on.

These discourses or ways of being (in) the organisation are not interesting because of how they line up (or don't) with particular forms of rationality or sociality or procedures for establishing meaningful statements. They are interesting because they are about practices for generating outcomes, not meanings. Imprecision, opacity, vagueness, obfuscation and obscurity are not

problems to be resolved; they are resources for getting things done.

At the nexus of these irreconcilable postures is the interesting space, the space of limit or ellipsis where ignorance and bad faith are produced. Of course: 'organisations produce ignorance, and thus the possibility of mistakes, through compartmentalisation and structural secrecy' (Croissant, 2014, p. 9). But we can go further than that here. The commitment to making certain types of things exhaustively knowable about universities (and surely there is an almost morbid excellence of data capture, even if this is oriented to rather particular ends: think of block grant allocation, workload models and their costing, learning analytics, research funding administration, library acquisitions, enrolment and attrition patterns, parking requirements and revenue…) simultaneously produces certain kinds of not-knowing, certain sorts of unthinkable things: it shapes the terrain of what is worth knowing and what is worth finding out about – what will actually count as knowledge. Ferrell, for example, has gracefully described how procedures for financial acquittal and ethical oversight render particular forms of research and community practice impossible (2011; see also Hammersley & Traianou, 2011). As Weber concisely pointed out, 'ignorance somehow agrees with the bureaucracy's interests' (1946, p. 234). In addition to this, the advertorial logic of total excellence tends to saturation, as though there were really nothing more to find out about doing something better, despite the widespread and evident burnout, boreout, soldiering, and apathy.

The space is hedged by various modalities of the turning of a blind eye: pretending-not-to-know, prefer-not-to-think-about-it, as-if-it-was-ok, can't-deal-with-that-right-now or choosing-not-to-acknowledge. These are routine bad faith gestures, a symptom and a further challenge of the actually existing neoliberal university. The impulse to silence is an inadvertent success of the organisation as a control system.

But there is a deeper agnosis also: a kind of dispossession of the imagination. Faber and Proops provide a helpful definition of 'closed ignorance', whereby 'we either neglect problems themselves, or do not take notice of intuitive insights, experience, information, models and methods of solution which are available inside of society' (1998, p. 117). It is a space of a kind of limit to change, to ownership, to action, and it is corrosive to the academic project overall, if that is understood to involve the articulation and development of active curiosity and the capacity to exercise it creatively and productively.

We can say that the dominant ways of framing and organising university work tend to produce ignorance

insofar as teaching and research are cast in such a way as to foreclose alternative forms of pedagogy or community engagement which would make more widely known and therefore real the possibility of actually really doing things in different ways. To pick an example more or less at random: thinking seriously about the implications of living in the plutonomic world gestured at in the opening paragraphs, and thinking seriously about what it means to play a role in the production of graduates for work and civic engagement in a context where the state plays a generative rather than remedial role in the production of precarity, marginality and economic inequality (Slater, 2012). That is to say, we could actively query why, given what we do know about the structural production of complex social problems, everything seems to go along just the same. What is it that we don’t know?

At the same time, then, this interesting space is the space of dereliction, which can be utilised to do unexpected things, because it is the sort of space nobody is really looking at, they can just feel that it is there. The what-we-don’t-know is actually quite exciting, and is often one of the reasons people are drawn to research and study in the first place: it is fun to find out new things.

This article consists of an argument, for the most part uncontentious, about impediments to effectiveness in university processes, through intersecting logics that thwart creativity and lead people to refrain from full and open participation. Similar impediments can be encountered elsewhere, in other organisational contexts, where such contexts constitute the very fabric of social life. This makes it all the more important to document, investigate and contest them. I would like to conclude by alluding again to the scepticism expressed above about the possibility of steering organisations like universities effectively via the ‘at a distance’ policy mechanisms currently favoured by Western states. As the sociological canon reminds us again and again, institutions are emergent outcomes of patterned and above all contingent interactions, which could always go otherwise. They are always dynamic and always in flux, and thus those who attend (to) them are always actively participating and always having effects. Finally, given the asymmetric nature of knowledge and ignorance, it is perhaps also worth reflecting on Henry Kissinger’s memorable quip: conventional forces of domination lose if they do not win; but all you have to do to win is not lose (1969, p. 214).

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