

The retreat from the critical

Social science research in the corporatised university

Professor Margaret Thornton

The commodification of research in the social sciences sees a focus on 'inputs' rather than 'outputs' and an emphasis on the 'science' rather than the 'social'. The empirical prevails at the expense of the critical, with lessening interest in, and support for, knowledge designed to interrogate orthodoxy. Increasingly, scholars have to operate in a government-created culture of compliance.

Editor's note: Readers will be aware that since this paper was written, the change of federal government has resulted in modifications in some areas identified by the author, e.g. the RQF and Ministerial control/intrusion in research grant processes.

The New Environment

Neoliberalism has transformed the character of social research in universities, which is valued less for its contribution to scholarship than for its performative value. Within the market paradigm, it is its income-generating capacity and value to end-users that are most highly esteemed. Entrepreneurialism is a corollary of the neoliberal withdrawal of state support for public goods. This decline is marked in the United States, the UK and Canada, as well as Australia. The emphasis is now on shifting the cost to the end users of research, the consequences of which are profound. We are inevitably seeing a trend towards the privatisation of knowledge so that research, like education, becomes another commodity in the market.

If private corporations fund research, the expectation is that they will be able to take out patents and capitalise on the findings. Technoscience is favoured as the most lucrative manifestation of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Imagine the dollar signs flashing in VCs' eyes at the thought of one of their researchers devising a cure for cancer! At the nation state level, it is hoped that the overall effect of harnessing the total research effort will augment the GNP and enhance Australia's status as a New Knowledge economy on the world stage. Knowledge has replaced sheep and wool as a source of wealth but, according to the corporatised university,

academics, like sheep, require careful management to get the best out of them.

The orchestration of research through a range of mechanisms is a notable characteristic of the neoliberal transformation of universities. Government is the driver and substantial funds have been injected into earmarked research as a stimulant. High profile programmes, such as the ARC Australian Federation Fellowships, have been established to encourage and retain the best and brightest researchers. However, such initiatives deflect attention away from the massive under-funding of the less glamorous everyday operations and infrastructural requirements. The fact that government-funded university operating grants have dropped from approximately 87 to 37 per cent in 20 years illustrates the point.

It is this grim financial reality that has compelled universities to become complicit in the new regime. Corporatisation, massification and commodification are all responses by universities to the funding shortfall. I focus on one facet of this mosaic – the commodification of research in social sciences, although much of what I have to say applies across the board.

Research entrepreneurialism

In accordance with the prevailing market ideology, research is now an 'investment' opportunity, rather than a social good.

Indeed, the institutional focus of research is no longer on 'outputs', that is, publications, so much as on 'inputs', that is, the money received from grants and consultancies in order to conduct the research in the first place. The money generated to conduct the research is the most significant criterion in the ability to attract funding in the two main government-funded research schemes in Australia, accounting for as much as 100 per cent of an individual grant, whereas research publications, the most significant criterion for social science academics, accounts for a mere ten per cent.¹ The dominance of the market means that unfunded research is now held in low esteem even though, as one academic put it, 'you might do the most important research rather than the most funded research'.

The entrepreneurial research culture, with the aid of competitive funding schemes, is subtly changing the manner in which research is undertaken. Instead of the modest project, in which academic researchers undertake the research themselves, the ambit of the project has been expanded to justify applying for larger and larger grants. The focus is on empirical data collection, cross-country comparisons, the employment of multiple research associates and technical assistants. Empirical research tends to emphasise the 'science' in social science, rather than the 'social' (Lee 1997). It is argued that the science denotes the impartial, the objective and the dispassionate, whereas the 'social' denotes the subjective and the affective, as well as the unruly voice of the Other. Emphasising the science at the expense of the social comports with the values of neoliberalism and the retreat from the social.

Gibbons et al. (1994) draw a distinction between what they term Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge in their analysis of knowledge production. Mode 1 knowledge refers to traditional disciplinary knowledge, whereas Mode 2 challenges the adequacy of this knowledge through a holistic approach to social issues. Thus, to address a problem, such as domestic violence, a Mode 1 approach would rarely look beyond the traditional parameters of the criminal law, as appearing in codes, legislation and case law, whereas Mode 2 might also look at gender relations in light of feminist, criminological, historical, sociological and public policy scholarship, as well as the stories of women themselves and accounts from women's refuges. It can readily be seen that the knowledge produced in each case would be quite different. The descriptors that Gibbons et al. associate with Mode 2 knowledge production: context, heterarchy, reflexivity, sociality, breadth and transience, all serve to corrode the certainty and stability associated with Mode I. Furthermore, by positioning the research close to the scientific, the positivist, the empirical, the critical voice is muted. Current funding regimes, particularly in the way they foster applied research and serve corporate interests, have a propensity to reify Mode 1 knowledge.

The sloughing off of the social under neoliberalism has been marked in the law discipline, for example, where applied

knowledge of the kind that facilitates business is once again favoured after social liberalism's brief flirtation with the social. Jurisprudence, legal theory, ethics and other sites of enquiry and theorisation now tend to be treated as marginal in legal education. A primary, if not exclusive, focus on technical legal knowledge means that disturbing questions are not asked about the exploitative business practices of powerful corporations, either at home or in the third world (Thornton 2002). Business schools are experiencing a similar phenomenon with the shedding of the prudential, so that social science academics are being made redundant (Butler 2006). Feminist, social justice and critical scholarship that challenges orthodoxy is contracting everywhere, unless it can be shown to be functional for the end user of the knowledge. Multinational and national corporations whose business is to maximise profits have little interest in knowledge designed to interrogate orthodoxy, a stance underpinned by government research policies.

Creating a compliant research culture

Only a few years ago, the ARC was preoccupied with excellence in research, without regard to area. The trend away from free enquiry to controlled research and problem-solving is one of the characteristics of knowledge production in contemporary society identified by Gibbons et al. (1994, p. 78). As a result, the specifications laid down by government funding bodies have progressively become more prescriptive. Not only are priorities now appearing, but substantial funds are being set aside for designated areas.²

The deployment of the research effort for the benefit of 'end users' within the market has been facilitated by the encouragement of consultancies, which are treated in the same way as basic research grants for the purposes of competitive research income. The superficial veneer of equal treatment disguises the way the production of applied and policy-oriented research for consultancies may contribute to the erasure of critical and theoretical perspectives (Tombs & Whyte 2003, p. 207). The data itself may also disappear as a result of privatisation. Principals may impose contractual conditions, including claims to the IP in any report produced, thereby preventing the researchers from using the data for scholarly publication. The research, despite being conducted by publicly funded academics in a so-called public university, may never see the light of day. Consultancies are a powerful symbol of the way the idea of the 'public' in the public university is being dismantled.

Perhaps of even greater concern in the constitution of knowledge is the way consultancies favour predetermined outcomes. In other words, independence, the fundamental premise of research, has been severely compromised. Instances have been recounted of principals declining to pay researchers because they did not care for the findings. The hope that future consultancies may emerge from a particular

arrangement encourages an uncritical stance on the part of both researchers and institutions. Polanyi's idea that freedom is central to the pursuit of knowledge (1944) is thwarted by consultancies because of the constraints that 'end users' may impose. His view is that only subordinated knowledge can emerge from a research environment that is unfree, that is, one in which certain presuppositions prevail and cannot be contested. In addition to the need to accede to the demands of principals, the financial rewards have a propensity to displace or cloak academic and ethical concerns. The depoliticising effects of the shift to consultancies and applied research are therefore profound.

The intermediate position in funded research between Discovery projects and consultancies is represented by linkage grants, whereby one or more industry partners agree to support research through financial and in-kind contributions, which are matched by Commonwealth funding. While applied research is preferred, the outcome is not owned in the same way as in consultancies, although there are likely to be constraints, such as approval of the industry partner to publish. The partner can also influence the direction of the project and, if the research is deemed too critical, the partner may choose to withdraw, in which case, it would almost certainly refuse to enter into a further arrangement.

The relationship between researcher and partner in linkage grants is reminiscent of that of patron and client relationship. The client occupies the status of supplicant, always dependent on the good graces of the patron, whose support can be withdrawn at will. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) (2005, p. 14) has noted the conservative bias that inheres in private sector co-funding. In social science and humanities grants, CAUT has also observed a favouring of technology and communication over social justice concerns, underpinning my point about the depoliticising potential of applied research.

Competitive bidding in all these forms of research enables governments to create a culture of compliance in order to devolve responsibility to universities (Marginson 1996, p. 90). Canadian universities, for example, undertook to double the amount of research they produced and triple their commercialisation within eight years for an additional financial investment (Rock 2002). Once university presidents had signed on the dotted line, the burden of compliance was then passed down the hierarchical chain to individual units and academics that are compelled to comply on pain of punishment.

Auditing schemes are another means of ensuring compliance, as well as measuring research productivity and ensure

compliance. The mooted Research Quality Framework (RQF) could make some attempt to assess the value of research, even though, as the expert advisory group acknowledges, there is no system-wide way to measure quality, impact or community benefit (Final Advice 2005, p. 11). It is likely that the scheme will fall back on a system of metrics, which is easier to administer, particularly as the UK is proposing to revert to metrics after several years of endeavouring to evaluate quality in its Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Metrics become another conservatising mechanism for sloughing off the unruliness of the social and maintaining the status quo. The performative imperative underpinning auditing schemes like the RQF requires academics to prove constantly that they are productive and worthwhile university citizens. If they once prided themselves on being good teachers – too bad – they must now reinvent themselves or be declared redundant.

In gearing up for the next round of competition for the substantial government funds attaching to a high ranking in a research assessment exercise, the norms of academic life are subverted. Research assessment becomes the driver of teaching policies, including course offerings and class sizes, as well as the institutional and individual choices regarding topic, type of research and publication destination. As a result, auditing may exercise a destructive effect on collegiality, as the UK experience reveals (Cownie 2004, pp. 138–41). In order to maximise the ranking of a school, a decision may have to be made as to which members of the school should be included. This may entail a single person, or sometimes a small panel of academics, reading their colleagues' work, ranking it and deciding whether it comports with national standards of excellence. If not, it is excluded from the audit. While some UK academics are philosophical about this aspect of auditing, others are scathing and embittered, especially when the rankings are made public. Academics are compelled to accept the new model of the 'auditable, competitive performer' as the favoured academic subject (Shore and Wright 1999, p. 569).

Other research enhancement strategies include an informal push to re-orient research into areas likely to attract funding. This may include an expectation that all members of a school belong to a designated stream, interdisciplinary grouping or area of strength in order to marshal and maximise the research effort. Competitive seeding money may be available within a school or faculty to support particular ventures. Commercial viability is invariably privileged over social justice in making these choices.

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Strategies designed to encourage all academics to be research active normally favour the 'carrot' rather than the 'stick' approach, although some institutions have vigorously embraced competition. They publish and circulate a list of publication points earned by each staff member in the previous year, which is then used as the basis for the distribution of staff development funds. The competition that inheres within the market is thereby mapped onto schools in respect of rewards systems, encouraging staff to equal or exceed the score of the highest performer. Such an aggressive system places a heavy burden on women trying to balance home and work, reifying the idea that the paradigmatic academic subject is autonomous and male.

It is difficult to feel other than equivocal about the contemporary emphasis on performativity within the audit culture. There seems to be an inverse relationship between the increasing amount of material being produced and that being read. Neoliberal researchers want to have an impact on the field, but they are writing primarily to be counted, which means that the pedestrian and the mediocre rate just as highly as the brilliant and the original. This vacuous idea of the performative, supported by the technologies of audit, suggests that academics may as well be producing widgets on an assembly line as engaging in what purports to pass for scholarship.

Academic freedom

Individual academics have conventionally had autonomy in respect of what research they chose to undertake. At the turn of the century, Marginson and Considine (2000, p. 152) stated that no Australian university managed research by explicit direction from above, as such a move would represent a direct challenge to academic freedom. However, this seems to have changed as circumstances have become more straitened, the managerial stranglehold stronger and external threats more pronounced. Pressures both from government, the corporatised university and end users have increasingly sought to shape research directions to ensure that they are functional.

While strictly speaking, academics cannot be stopped from researching in areas of interest in their own time, discretionary moneys for travel, research and scholarships, may be earmarked for use in designated priority areas or 'areas of strength', which have the effect of favouring some scholarship and disfavouring others. Preferences may also operate through appointments and promotions, pay loadings and the bestowal of honours and rewards. Self-determination in terms of one's research is seen

as the last bastion of academic freedom. Few are likely to be prepared to 'live on bark' in order to do their research, as one British scholar, whom I interviewed, suggested.

Furthermore, academic freedom is presently being overtly repressed on a number of fronts. One of the most blatant manifestations of government policing to ensure researchers satisfy particular ends involved direct interference in decisions of the ARC, which is not an arm of government but a quasi-independent body set up under statutory authority. For the 2005 round, it was revealed that the then Minister for Education, Science and Technology, Dr Nelson, declined to ratify three Humanities projects, despite a rigorous process of peer-review. It was subsequently reported that three high profile lay people had been appointed to an ARC standards committee to scrutinise the titles and the 100-word summaries of grant projects recommended for funding to determine their ability to deliver 'national benefit' (Illing 2005a). The Minister declined to ratify another seven projects in the 2006 round (Illing 2005b).

It is notable that all the impugned projects were allegedly in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the hard sciences were perceived to be less problematic, again reifying a belief in a scientific/social binarism. Furthermore, the projects were all reputed to have been in the area of sexuality, signalling the neoconservative morality that goes hand-in-glove with neoliberal economic policies. At least some applicants in the present round are reported to have internalised this swing by toning down their projects, particularly in respect of sexuality, feminism, race and class. The abolition of the ARC Board means that political intervention can now operate insidiously at an institutional 'executive' level and the academic community will know nothing about it.

Security issues are directly impacting on academic freedom. The anti-terrorist legislation emanating from the attacks on the World Trade Centre of 11 September 2001 has authorised an extraordinary degree of surveillance of private citizens. The *USA Patriot Act 2001*, passed soon after 9/11 has been invoked extensively in ways that infringe upon the work of academics. Research projects, classroom speech and published material have all been under scrutiny, with some frightening accounts from the United States and elsewhere (Gerstmann and Streb 2006).

Australia followed the United States with its own raft of anti-terrorism legislation (Nette 2006), including the far-reaching *Anti-Terrorism Act 2005* (Commonwealth), which is being invoked, like the *Patriot Act*, to delimit the academic freedom of researchers. Emeritus Professor Riaz Hassan, a sociologist

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at Flinders University, was compelled to scale back his ARC-funded project on suicide bombers, when the Federal Government informed him that he could be in breach of the Act (Edwards and Stewart 2006). It is notable that Professor Hassan's research fitted squarely into the Commonwealth research priority area of safeguarding Australia, but this was not enough to protect him.

In the US, the *Patriot Act* has been used in ways that directly threaten research. For example, federal and state law-enforcement agencies have made hundreds of requests to libraries annually for the borrowing records of patrons (Streb 2006, p. 9). In Australia, the *Anti-Terrorism Act* has led to several books on jihad being officially banned, and in a subsequent act of self-policing, at least one university has withdrawn these books from its shelves voluntarily (O'Keefe 2006).³ The banning of books evokes McCarthyism and is completely contrary to the spirit of academic freedom in which all knowledge is contestable.

However, these extreme examples of terror censorship deflect attention away from the way repression is being insidiously normalised in the everyday life of the university as a result of the commodification and privatisation of research. In this environment, it is only knowledge with use value in the market that is privileged. Any critique that takes place is circumscribed by the constraints of market orthodoxy. In this way, the vital role of academics as public intellectuals is inhibited through the new marketised research norms. The repressive tendency is subtle and insidious. It is effected through practices of governmentality that are shaped by prevailing state and university research priorities within a climate of neoconservatism. Academic entrepreneurialism thereby has the potential to carry with it a dangerous element of totalitarianism. Despite the obvious ramifications for academic freedom, academics themselves have been remarkably quiescent in light of the trend, which is testament to the effectiveness of the compliance strategies.

Conclusion

The research revolution is contributing to the disintegration and reorganisation of knowledge in modern society (Gibbons et al. 1994). Massification, privatisation and bureaucratisation has endangered serious thinking in the university and, according to some, even brought it to an end (Evans 2004). Despite the effort devoted to inducing the production of vast quantities of research, together with the process of harnessing, commodifying and measuring it, there is no evidence that the multifarious initiatives have improved its actual quality. How could it be otherwise when the focus is on quantification, or metrics, and academics complain that they no longer have time to reflect on what they are doing or time to read what others are writing?

Lyotard (1984) observed 20 years ago that knowledge had replaced land and raw materials in the struggles between nation states. But Australia is unlikely to be the victor on the global economic stage if its research initiatives denote mediocrity and intellectual impoverishment. It cannot be ignored that university managers and academics themselves have played a role in subverting the independence and critical social conscience that constitutes the linchpin of what remains of the idea of the university.

Margaret Thornton is Professor of Law and ARC Professorial Fellow in the ANU College of Law at the Australian National University. She is also President of the Association for the Public University (APU). This paper is the text of an address presented at RMIT on 11 August 2006.

Endnotes

1. The schemes are (a) Research Training Scheme: research Masters and PhDs completed 50%; research income 40%; research publications 10%; (b) Institutional Grant Scheme: research income 60%; research student load 30%; research publications 10%; (c) Research Infrastructure Block Grant: research income 100%.
2. The four research priorities for Commonwealth-funded research for 2006 are: (i) An Environmentally Sustainable Australia; (ii) Promoting and Maintaining Good Health; (iii) Frontier Technologies for Building and Transforming Australian Industries; (iv) Safeguarding Australia.
3. The ban is bizarre in light of the fact that these books are available overseas and on the Internet (Ruffles 2006).

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