



THE MADNESS AND MALADY OF MANAGERIALISM



VERY RECENTLY several admirable and insightful publications have appeared in scholarly and intellectual forums dealing with the follies and evils in Australian universities brought about by their corporatisation over the past fifteen or so years. Corporatisation, as it has been applied to the universities, essentially comprises commercialisation and managerialism. Together they have totally re-oriented our tertiary education institutions. While the one has effectively provided them with a new imperative (income) the other has given them the means of achieving it (obedience). Here it is proposed to summarise three such publications and go on not so much to criticise as to complement them.

The rationale for the present offering is that perhaps a lecturer's grass-roots perspective rather than another overview is needed to illuminate the near-terminal damage that has been done to our universities, particularly by managerialism, since the Dawkins Revolution was launched in 1987-88. Although an academic, I make no apology for making use of the higher education argot of the day; it is a useful way of demonstrating the insanity currently being perpetrated in Australian universities.

Margaret Thornton, Professor in Law and Legal Studies at La Trobe University, in a path-breaking paper ("Corrosive Leadership (or Bullying by Another Name): A Corollary of the Corporatised Academy?", *Australian Journal of Labour Law*, 17, 2, 2004) has argued that corporatisation has produced an increase in bullying of academic staff. To her, the universities' new concern to have academics do more work with less money has created a culture "which would seem to foster bullying practices".

Since universities have now adopted "entrepreneurialism or profit-making, values that have become central to the educational market" in which they operate, they have developed what Thornton calls "the new managerialism". Students have become customers, and aca-

demics have become "productive units" (somewhat like machines in factories). The value of both "is assessed primarily in terms of the competitive dollars they generate". Lost in this transformation are collegiality, academic freedom, work satisfaction, and, not least of all—here one can easily read between her lines—the courage that was once considered an essential attribute in a worthy academic.

UNIVERSITIES

Jan Currie, Emeritus Professor in Education at Murdoch University, is less concerned with the rise of bullying than with the loss of collegiality as universities "pursue teaching and research for profits", a quest, she argues, which "has begun to threaten the academic quality of Australian tertiary education" ("Organisational Culture of Australian Universities: Community or Corporate?", keynote address, HERDSA conference, University of Sydney, July 2005). Managerialism in Australian universities is something she began studying about ten years ago and she cites studies which reveal "[the] strong change in management styles from the collegial to the managerial style of businesses".

Currie is clearly just as concerned by the personal effects that corporatisation, commercialisation and managerialism have had on academic staff as she is with their impact on the universities themselves. She writes about academics' frustration, high stress levels, low job satisfaction, and disillusionment. A striking feature of the paper is her refusal to predict whether things will improve or only get worse. She begins with the question as to whether "universities in the 21st century [can] be more like scholarly communities than corporations" and ends by asking whether "it is too much to hope" that the federal government, when dealing with universities, might turn away from commercialisation and "revert to notions of community".

Rodney Nilsen, an Associate Professor in Mathematics at the University of Wollongong, published in this magazine a remarkably succinct summary

("Don't Do What Australia Has Done", *Quadrant*, November 2004) of the ways in which Australian universities have been compromised by "the Dawkins policy" and subsequent changes to higher education institutions since 1988. Given the necessity to become more financially independent, universities have been forced to enrol more students and especially more full-fee-paying students. In other words, they have had to pursue commercialisation. Higher education, in the form of teaching, has increasingly been seen as a commodity like any other and its integrity compromised by priority being given to what is vocational rather than intellectual, to "dumbing down", and to student evaluation of academic staff. Researchers have been reduced to the status of technicians, required to apply for external funding and to focus on short-term problems, their principal purpose to enhance their university's "research image".

While all too brief, this is possibly the most profound of the three because Nillsen also asserts that teaching and research have been not merely degraded and devalued but totally subordinated. Administration obviously takes precedence over both. Universities are now characterised by "top-down management" and an obsession with management procedures and computer technology. The entire "unified national system" of universities is geared towards giving the federal government—always the single most important provider of funds—what it wants. The idea that the university—any university—should have as its main goal the pursuit of the truth has been slowly eroded in favour of the notion that it ought primarily be an instrument to achieve microeconomic change.

Two seemingly incompatible bed partners—liberal economics and postmodernism—have joined forces to ensure that Australian universities serve economic rather than academic *cum* intellectual ends. The eagerness of all universities to secure public as well as private money, coupled with their uncertainty as to whether their traditional goal is achievable, has brought about their subjugation to the government—mainly the federal government—of the day.

Not least of all Nillsen raises the question of whether it is still possible in Australian universities to hold academic as opposed to corporate values. Because the federal government still controls the purse strings, it has largely been in a position to tell almost all universities not only what to do but also what to say and think. Nillsen rightly talks about "the indirect control of universities by means of a language of conformity" which reflects "government values and ideology".

To achieve that conformity—and the income it might allow—university managers have imposed more and more restrictions on academic staff, to the extent that academics in this country are possibly the most tightly controlled in the Western world. But not merely their

behaviour is controlled; the language they are required to use and the way of thinking they are likely to develop have been effectively determined by the system of rewards and punishments that has been put in place. Everything has been subordinated not to the pursuit of a university's—any university's—traditional goals, but to the prosperity of the university as a business enterprise.

MANAGERIALISM demands strong-willed, even ruthless, but above all pragmatic people. In Australian universities today it requires managers who are willing to abandon the values their own education might have instilled in them and adopt those of the government, public servants, and university hierarchs they now serve. It requires people who are eager, or at least willing, to accept that, given the economic constraints under which universities in this country currently operate, the pursuit of money is a necessity, that of truth a mere luxury.

Of course, it helps enormously if such people have already been converted to postmodernism or one of the several intellectual fashions that have permeated not merely the humanities and social sciences especially but also the entire university sector as a whole over the past twenty-five years. If there is no such thing as objective reality, if the truth is only a pipedream, and if there are only "truths", then the duty of academics to tolerate the unorthodox, the idiosyncratic, or the politically weak virtually disappears, and the need to accept whatever "truth" is handed down to them from above becomes overwhelming. But, as Tony Coody and Seumas Miller wrote in 1993, well before the current madness had become apparent to most of us: "If we give up on truth and the possibility of objectivity, we abandon the intellectual life for fantasy, power-plays and propaganda."

Before the Dawkins and subsequent revolutions in higher education—which began in the late 1980s and have effectively been going on ever since—it was common for senior or at least experienced academics to accept the leadership of a discipline or department, a school, or a faculty, out of a sense of duty. Some, of course, aspired to more than a temporary advance of their income, status, power and privileges, and went on to become permanent administrators. But there were always a significant number who wanted to return to their teaching—and especially research—when they'd done their stint. The best of them put their own teaching and research careers "on hold" so that their colleagues—particularly the younger and less experienced ones—could establish a foothold in academe. Their function was to take on many of those tasks and duties which would distract others from pursuing the traditional purposes of a university. Perhaps above all, their loyalty was given to those below rather than those above them on the academic hierarchy.

The seemingly never-ending waves of amalgamation, restructuring and re-organisation of Australian universities that have occurred over the past twenty years have almost completely reversed these traditions. More than ever before—and especially over the past five to ten years—senior academics take on managerial positions less because they think they ought to than because they are bored with teaching and research and want to escape from what have become onerous or—given the sometimes dubious worth of assessing students these days—near-farcical tasks. Once they establish themselves as what are often called “line managers”, they are in the best of all positions to farm out most if not all of their teaching responsibilities to junior staff and postgraduates and to excuse themselves from almost any research activity. Such occupations become to them “lower order” activities. And, of course, the more they have struggled for positions of power and influence, and the longer they are in them, the less likely they are to want to relinquish them and the perquisites they offer.

While the development of the “unified national system” was meant to take Australian universities into the twenty-first century, it has instead fostered something akin to the most notable feature of the High Middle Ages, the feudal system. Any number of schools and departments in Australian universities resemble fiefs in which lords (line managers) rule over peasants (academic and other staff) and owe their loyalty to liege lords (deans and vice-chancellors).

It is not merely that heads of department have the principal say over matters of appointment, promotion and tenure. Insofar as their signature is required for just about everything that academics need to pursue their teaching and research—anything from the essential to the extraordinarily mundane and trivial—they effectively determine whether lecturers and other academic staff can properly pursue their jobs. Never before have heads of department had so much power over the people they supervise.

Thus, within each university a rigid hierarchy has been created in which academics are almost totally dependent upon their heads of school, who are in turn subordinate to the dean of their faculty and so on up the ladder. In today’s university the role of the head of school—whether elected or appointed—is less to facilitate the particular interests of the academics under his supervision than to ensure that all comply with directives from above. Supervisors achieve their ambitions not by telling their superiors what their lecturers need but by imposing on those they supervise what their own

supervisors demand. Although commonly known as “top-down management”, it would, as I suggest, be just as appropriate to call it academic feudalism.

The net effect is a system which rewards obedience, conformity and quiescence, and punishes non-compliance, eccentricity and dissent. Above all it breeds fear, cowardice, cynicism and sycophancy—this in that sector of society which has traditionally lauded outspokenness, idealism and independent thought and, more than most, tolerated the expression of controversial, unusual or unpopular views.

Consequently, there are any number of academics in Australia today who represent the diametric opposites of those values for which Western universities are meant to stand. Coercion has replaced persuasion; teaching and research are subordinate to administration; scepticism about and even contempt for objective truth and those who believe in it have replaced its pursuit; content is considered less important than methods and skills; freedom of speech has been replaced by confinement to one’s own “area of expertise”. Even the idea of the university as a place

where one might lead a contemplative life has almost completely disappeared. What is wanted—and rewarded—is not thought but action. The academic who sits in a lounge chair in his office or the library is very likely to be thought of as taking a rest because he isn’t at his computer.

MANAGERIALISM IS OFTEN SO wasteful it’s farcical. It is not important that justice be done, only that it appear to be done. Take, for instance, the case of appointments. Very often, a position is created with a particular appointee in mind, usually an “insider”. Management will go to great lengths to see that all “the proper procedures” are followed. The position will be advertised in the media, senior academics will take time to shortlist and interview candidates and eventually “select” one. The university—as well as the taxpayer—will typically be put to considerable expense to fly in, accommodate, and wine and dine at least two or three external candidates. But it’s all for the sake of appearance because the real decision has been made in advance. Very likely, the job description, selection criteria and composition of the selection committee have been pre-arranged so as to maximise the chances that the local “favourite son”—or daughter—will succeed.

The cost is seen as irrelevant. What is important, apart from the fact that the “right” candidate is selected,

The idea that the university should have as its main goal the pursuit of the truth has been slowly eroded in favour of the notion that it ought primarily be an instrument to achieve micro-economic change.

is that those candidates whose hopes have been futile from the start cannot object on the grounds that these "proper procedures" have not been followed. They have no leg to stand on if they simply claim that the whole exercise was a farce and that the result was virtually predetermined.

Many people are appointed to academic positions in Australian universities in this way. The result is a form of incest in the academic world. There are many schools or departments or, more likely, discipline areas, whose staff have been drawn largely if not entirely from those who did their first degree or their doctoral thesis and had their early teaching experience at the appointing university. Very few people seem prepared to admit that such practices might be dubious or that they do little to enhance the university's reputation.

ONE OF THE MOST blatant paradoxes of managerialism is its "pragmatic" approach to research. As Thornton, Currie, Nillsen and any number of others suggest, universities are now incomparably more concerned with research money than with research *per se*. Whereas money was once considered one of several prerequisites for research, the means have now become the ends. Money is not pursued to allow research, research is pursued to attract and acquire money. Managers, who might do little or no research of their own, have in many places become almost insistent that the only research done under their auspices is that which generates money, either in the form of the research grant or, to a far lesser extent, the Department of Education, Science and Training-approved or "audited" publication.

It does not matter to them that in many disciplines research might require a lot of time but only a little money. In fact, those who are able to do a lot with very little are barely tolerated. The more commercially-minded managers—and they are on the increase—want research which requires and generates money, not that which can be done cheaply. As Simon Marginson suggested about five years ago, managers are simply not interested in researchers who can work "on the smell of an oily rag". While the ordinary citizen *cum* taxpayer might think such researchers are giving good value for money, the manager is far more likely to consider that they are letting down their section of the university by not contributing to "the bottom line", which can only be measured in dollars.

Nor does it matter to them that in many disciplines a large number of publications which do not attract DEST "points"—and therefore money—make a significant contribution to scholarship or at least a profession. Textbooks, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, bibliographies, articles in non-refereed journals are all publications which DEST is unlikely to approve and therefore

reward with extra funds. A leading educationist, Tony Taylor, recently deplored the priorities of universities who urge staff in their faculties of education to publish "supposedly high-status theoretical research" in international journals and in so doing steer those researchers away from publishing in professional teachers' journals whose circulation might be limited to Australia or even a single state. He was effectively criticising DEST's priorities and the willingness of universities and academic staff to submit to them.

Managers at the level of "the coalface" now enjoy such power that they can virtually require academics they supervise to pursue research which "brings in" funds and to eschew research which requires minimal expenditure or whose "outcomes" produce little or no money for the school or faculty. The project with a good chance of attracting "outside money" might be enthusiastically endorsed; the application which asks for a little money from an internal research grants scheme might be returned unsigned. Simply refusing to allow academics to go "off campus", on whatever pretext, could destroy researchers' ability to plan let alone engage in research.

The researcher who might hastily produce three "audited" publications a year is correspondingly more valued than the one who takes her time and produces one painstakingly-researched and carefully-thought-out publication over the same period. Even worse, the researcher whose project might require years of work before writing and publication are possible might be discouraged from undertaking such a venture. Managerialists and the research committees they dominate won't wait; they typically want "outcomes"—by which they mean publications which earn the university money—within the current financial year. Academic reality must always be subordinated to managerial reality. The research must be designed for the money, not the other way round.

For these reasons an untold amount of worthy but long-term research is impossible, simply because in many disciplines academics would not be allowed such latitude. Of course, supervisors are typically in no position to assess the academic worth of a publication to a particular sub-field, but they often *are* able at a glance to see its economic worth to their school. What matters to them is not quality but quantity, not scholarship but income. In these ways, the new culture of Australian universities encourages haste, waste and mediocrity.

Indeed, great pressure is placed on academics to accept that the standards their discipline holds dear should be subordinated to the needs of the university. To minimise students' confusion and therefore complaints, managers might require lecturers within a particular discipline to teach students only one referencing style—not only a transgression of professional autonomy but an example of a form of "dumbing down" which has so far

received hardly any attention from critics.

Academics in recent years have been virtually bombarded with the message that what one teaches students is less important than how it is taught. The lesson is often reinforced via the now annual performance review and professional development exercise. Lecturers wanting to do away with lectures and do all their teaching online would almost certainly be permitted, even encouraged, to do so. On the other hand, the lecturer who stated that he simply wanted to acquaint himself more thoroughly with the subject-matter of the courses he taught by reading more books would very likely be greeted with stony silence. In the modern Australian university the acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge no longer holds pride of place; if you want to know more about your subject you do it "in your own time"—a term which to the conscientious academic should be meaningless.

Managerialism has radically curtailed freedom of speech in the modern Australian university. Many universities have, on one hand, encouraged their academic staff to "engage with" the community via the media but, on the other hand, forbidden them to speak publicly on matters outside their area of expertise. Lecturers can, of course, write to the papers or appear on television, but only as citizens rather than academics. While this puts most academics in a bind, it is even worse for those in discipline areas such as the humanities, social sciences and education, who can discern no clear limits to either their research interests or their public concerns.

Line managers pay lip-service to the idea that an academic can still say what he wants to his students but many would be quick to react if any students complained about what was said. Academics are free to talk to or e-mail others about anything but only on a one-to-one basis. Academics are typically not allowed to use e-mail lists without the sanction of their supervisors. Line managers are most unlikely to "sign off" on any message which might in any way embarrass the university and perhaps cause their own supervisors to question their fitness for the positions they hold.

WHILE AUSTRALIAN universities have never before been so hierarchical and their academics so controlled, they have never before tried so hard to delude their staff—and perhaps themselves—that they remain communities of scholars. Vice-chancellors talk about themselves as leaders of "the team", by which they usually mean whatever chancellery personnel they head. Line man-

agers address those they supervise as "mate" and "folks" as if to belie the power differential.

One of the strongest criticisms a line manager can level at an academic is that he or she is not "a team player", which usually means that such lecturers have expressed unease about some of the things they are ordered to do. Never before has the rhetoric of collegiality been so often and so improperly used to achieve conformity. This extraordinary hypocrisy was well expressed by one of Jan Currie's respondents, a scientist: "The worst thing is that they still PRETEND that it's collegial! ... It's really now a cosmetically enhanced version of the IBM management bible."

This, of course, suggests another of the characteristic features of managerialism—its preoccupation with technology, in effect the use of computers in teaching. No one could doubt that "e-learning", or putting courses online, has greatly improved the ability of any number of students—especially far-flung students—to achieve access to higher education. Online teaching has for many years been regarded as the panacea with which to solve many of the difficulties facing cash-strapped universities trying to teach too many students with too few staff. In every university in Australia today an enormous amount of money has been spent on putting courses online and an equally great amount of pressure has been placed on staff to abandon more traditional forms of teaching. Indeed, given the number of e-mails to do with online teaching that an average academic would receive in a given year, an outside observer might be forgiven for believing that this is the only way students are currently taught.

In fact, some of the claims made on behalf of online teaching are absurd. It does not necessarily save universities money because many costs are simply transferred from the production of print-based materials to the development of online resources. Much more sinister, however, is the idea that it facilitates communication between teachers and students, especially external students. In fact, it tends to do the opposite. Indeed, many academics find online teaching attractive precisely because they believe it allows them to spend less time on teaching and more on research and administration. What they ignore is the human touch, that is, real interaction between teacher and student. In courses with small and moderate enrolments, teachers might well provide students with a far superior educational experience via face-to-face talk (if possible), telephone calls, and personal e-mails. The distance students of today engaged in "e-learning" who are sent a mass of

The institution in our society which is supposed to place a higher value on clear communication than any other is dominated by those who obfuscate, evade and confuse.

THE MADNESS AND MALADY OF MANAGERIALISM

resources they have to download are no less likely to feel remote from the university than those who used to be sent study materials and asked to go out and buy a textbook.

But to many line managers “e-learning” is “the way to go”. It demonstrates to their superiors in the organisation that they are modern, “innovative” and efficient. Online teaching is seen as beneficial to all because, so it is believed, it requires less effort from the teacher and more from the student. Line managers’ superiors like to be told that less formal contact time has been scheduled for students, because it reduces the money needed for such activities. Ultimately, however, it is the student, increasingly seen by universities as a customer to be served or even just a unit to be processed, who suffers, simply because the quality of his or her education is ultimately far less dependent upon the technology at the university’s disposal than it is upon the willingness of its teachers to devote time to each of their students.

What managerialism has done, it must be emphasised, has converted even more ambitious lecturers from academics into administrators. Line managers at even the lowest level are so involved with administration that they have little time, let alone inclination, for teaching or research. They often see their entire *raison d’être* in terms of what they can do for their school, faculty or division, which essentially means ensuring that the university holds it in sufficiently high regard to fund its continued existence and allow it to expand its course offerings, research profile and staffing level. If they succeed in both—and if they also are successful in “generating income”—they are regarded as good managers and their prospects for rising within the university are bright. The problem is that in the process they lose sight of what the disciplines they oversee are there to do.

Contrary to what Gavin Moodie has suggested and what universities are now doing, departments are better served by amateurs who want to remain academics. No one has ever convincingly shown how academics can provide good academic leadership if they effectively cease to be scholars—unless, of course, scholarship itself has been devalued.

“IT WAS EVER THUS”—but not to the same degree. What has also happened since Dawkins is that our universities have been converted into political arenas in which this new generation of managers not merely compete and negotiate with one another for resources but also exercise powers their predecessors never had. For those who are neither dedicated teachers nor keen researchers, it is as if Moses had parted the Red Sea. Managerialism has created for such academics the means whereby they might not merely survive but thrive. Their entire way of life consists of mission statements, position papers and

reviews of one sort or another; committee meetings, interviews and corridor discussions; phone calls, e-mails and memoranda amongst themselves; interstate conferences with other departmental heads and deans; graduation, prize and other ceremonies. Alliances are formed, favours are asked, deals are made, debts are owed, careers are advanced.

Thus, what is virtually a sub-culture is created, incorporating the middle and upper echelons of the university’s managerial staff. Two of its basic principles are organisational loyalty and managerial solidarity. One is afforded a level of protection as long as one supports the university (no matter how anti-academic and anti-intellectual its decisions) and one’s managerial peers (no matter how shabby their treatment of the academics they supervise).

The more successful among them are those who have learned how to “work the system”. Their sense of mission is entirely centred on the organisation which employs them rather than the discipline or profession to which they might belong. Their orientation is inward (their employer’s interests) rather than outward (humanity as a whole). In Australian universities today, it is not universalism but localism which this country’s academics are conditioned to accept.

Thus, to many who make a career solely out of administration, the university becomes a sort of battleground in which they jockey for position for their particular patch of it and thereby not only get on but also achieve immense satisfaction. The humdrum of teaching (especially marking) and the risks associated with research (there is no guarantee that what you write will be published) are left behind in an environment in which success comes from wheeling and dealing and belonging to the ever-expanding managerial elite. Joy comes not from the influence one has on students or the contribution one makes to scholarship but simply from wielding power and acquiring status in the huge and complex organisation every Australian university has become. Often such people would not be able to gain employment in their discipline in any other university; they can only rise in the system if they remain in the same university or move sideways into a managerial role in another.

Managers’ identification with one another and their sense of belonging to not only the organisation but also its new elite are reinforced by the terms they use. A new language—“managerese”—has emerged in Australian universities. Gone are the days when one could converse with a highly intelligent administrator and be confident that they would communicate with honesty and terminological exactitude. One is more likely these days to be met with a barrage of diplomatic, disarming, but in the final analysis dismissive and empty clichés such as *processes*, *way forward* and *closure*. Some of the

THE MADNESS AND MALADY OF MANAGERIALISM

favourite expressions, such as *stakeholders*, reflect the managers' abandonment of belief in objective truth and their cynical outlook that anything anyone says to them simply reveals what they want, that is, their personal interests. *Cob* (close of business) suggests a nine-to-five mentality that is totally foreign to the way academics go about their real work. Almost all of this jargon reflects the hierarchical, authoritarian and non-collegial nature of Australian universities today. Words like *directive* and *instructions* and terms like *compliance* and *sign off* are now commonplace.

ALL SUB-CULTURES and disciplines develop their own jargon. In my own (history) one cannot go far without using words such as *aggrandisement* and *hegemony*. But managerialists, as Nilsen implied, habitually use words in a glib and shallow way to achieve dubious ends. Terms like *team player* and *collegiality* are used not to stress a common interest in the traditional functions of a university but to put pressure on recalcitrant individuals to conform to what their peers have already been forced to accept. When managerialists talk about "collegiality" they really mean conformity (outward compliance and perhaps eventually private acceptance) and cronyism (a concern to ally oneself with the powers that be).

All universities trumpet their "commitment" to "equity" and "diversity". But by "equity" they do not mean fairness but the provision of extra opportunities to people from supposedly disadvantaged sectors of society to attend a university, which means more income for the university. Similarly, "diversity" has nothing to do with tolerating a range of viewpoints—something universities no longer genuinely regard as sacred—but is wholly concerned with maximising enrolments by drawing students from as wide a variety of sources as possible. In Australian universities today, the English language itself is not the least important feature of our heritage being debased.

"Managerese" is much more sinister than it is amusing. In universities today it is commonplace to receive documents, prepared by managers on behalf of either themselves or committees of which they are a part, that are written in such tortuous prose that they are virtually incomprehensible. While it is usually possible to work out the purpose of such a document, it is often impossible to discern its arguments and therefore come to grips with them. In committees managers very often have their way less because they are acting in the role of *primus inter pares* than because they seem to be the only ones who fully understand the paperwork on the

table. Confusion and uncertainty work to their advantage, and it is likely that the only real debate in such situations occurs among those whose working lives are almost wholly taken up with administration. The paradox is that the institution in our society which is supposed to place a higher value on clear communication than any other is dominated by those who obfuscate, evade and confuse.

Managers see it as essential to maximise the number of students the university enrolls and therefore the income it enjoys either directly from full-fee-paying students or indirectly from Commonwealth subsidies for HECS students. More than this, managerialism itself is seen as imperative to achieve these ends. All of the evils associated with entrance requirements and assessment standards which have been increasingly exposed over the past decade or so—mainly by disillusioned and angry lecturers—could not have integrated themselves into the system had not line managers been able to constantly engender into their academic staff the apprehension that if student numbers and income from them fall then staff jobs might be lost. Dumbing-down, soft marking, grade inflation, degree devaluation, even widespread plagiarism—none of these would be major problems in Australian universities today if every line

manager had given their lecturers and markers their full support and given precedence to standards rather than numbers. But many managers nowadays see a cowed and compliant academic workforce as a *sine qua non* of a university's economic health.

Managers have been very concerned to establish a legal basis for their behaviour to protect themselves should there be any complaints from the academics they supervise. In the event that their decisions and actions are challenged

from below they are apt to quote passages from their university's workplace grievance policy and procedures—very likely adopted word-for-word from the public service—which if interpreted broadly allow supervisors extraordinary latitude. Indeed, literally any comment, advice and action by managers ostensibly designed to improve the "work performance or work-related behaviour" of those they supervise can be considered legitimate and acceptable.

In such circumstances managers are quick to point out that their behaviour cannot be considered harassment or bullying—"the repeated less favourable treatment of a person by another ... which may be seen as unreasonable and inappropriate"—even if it impacts much more on one than others. To repeat, in today's universities line managers have never enjoyed such power, nor has managerial solidarity been so strong. Moreover,

*If George Orwell
were alive today,
he might be
tempted to write
a sequel to
"1984" and base
it on Australia's
universities.*

THE MADNESS AND MALADY OF MANAGERIALISM

it is virtually impossible for academics to prove that they have suffered "less favourable treatment" from their supervisors because, among other things, their peers—those who might once have been called colleagues—are so frightened by the new environment that they are reluctant to provide those aggrieved with the comparative information they need to prepare a case of workplace harassment and bullying.

The point is that in the modern Australian university no clear distinction *can* be made between workplace bullying and harassment on the one hand and legitimate supervision on the other. Thornton writes about "the conflation between managing and bullying", "the inchoate idea of bullying", and makes the point that "most workplace bullying remains legally equivocal". Universities' priorities have changed radically over the past twenty years away from the academic and toward the economic, and the policies and procedures they once had to deal with idlers and miscreants have been revised to meet new challenges. Managers can deny tenure or promotion, launch unsatisfactory performance actions or disciplinary proceedings, or even ensure that an academic is made redundant.

Universities are increasingly using these sorts of provisions to silence, punish or expel whistleblowers and "troublemakers" rather than to rid themselves of people who are (say) lazy, or misbehave via verbal abuse or physical violence, improper sexual advances or assaults. Australian universities these days are less often disciplining staff who compromise other individuals in the academic community than trying to protect themselves from renegades and mavericks who are disillusioned, angry and upset that the academy itself has abandoned the values they expected it would uphold.

The typical university in Australia has virtually conditioned its academic staff towards organisational conformity as opposed to intellectual independence. Academics' achievement of long-held personal goals such as tenure and promotion now depend less on their contribution to teaching, research or scholarship than on their "loyalty", that is, the degree to which they go along with whatever management requires them to do and refrain from criticising their university.

ACADEMICS MUST ALSO accept what Nilsen calls "a trivialisation of the rôle of the academic". They must accept, for instance, that the preparation of a new course or research towards another article is, in the university's overall scheme of things, less important than a response to this or that demand for information or accession to the wishes of management, particularly if it might mean more money for the university. They must accept that the real work of a university is whatever serves the university's interests—which is effectively what supervi-

sors decide it is. They must accept that, whereas once supervisors principally existed to make time for their colleagues to pursue teaching and research, now such line managers' purpose is to ensure that such "colleagues" comply with whatever "directives" either supervisors or such supervisors' superiors pass down to academics at "the coalface". There is now no unwritten, unspoken or collegial presumption as to what the real work of the university is; this is up to managers, not academics, to determine.

Managerialists seek to ensure that political rather than academic reality prevails. Broadly speaking, managerialism has forced Australian universities to betray their traditional mission by completely disregarding truth even in the form of common sense. Nilsen made reference to universities' "failure of Orwellian proportions to pay attention to the meaning of words, since the words are to function purely as a sign of conformity".

This trend is ubiquitous but is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in one of managerialism's latest fashions—the enunciation of the "generic skills" and the "graduate attributes" that students in Australian universities are eventually supposed to possess. Innumerable hours might be spent within a discipline or school producing documents which make absurd claims about what its courses will do for students. In history, for instance, one of a dozen or so declarations might be that among their attributes "History graduates will ... have a broad range of historical knowledge" and "have a commitment to ethical action and social responsibility". Among the skills they will allegedly have might be the ability "to be critical of a range of historical issues and interpretations" and "to communicate cogent historical argument and/or research results in appropriate media". An extraordinary amount of space in course profiles and literature given to students will consist of claims of this sort.

To participate in sessions organised to formulate this drivel is to experience a sense of unreality. Highly intelligent and able men and women might sit around a table for hours or days and, without so much as the saving grace of a tongue in cheek, agonise over the wording of this or that attribute or skill. One could be forgiven for seeing the resemblance between this sort of exercise and what went on in (say) the ministry of information in the Soviet Union at the height of Stalinism.

The fact is that Australian universities today are no more students' or academics' utopias than communist countries were workers' paradises. Quite the reverse. An academic could lecture in universities in this country for decades and never encounter any graduates who possess the full range of "graduate attributes" and "generic skills" that these declarations claim they *will* have by the time they finish their degree.

In an era in which it has never before been so diffi-

THE MADNESS AND MALADY OF MANAGERIALISM

cult to teach non-performing students or to pass them with a clear conscience, lecturers might be required to make these sorts of not merely grandiose but ridiculous claims before their courses are approved. The whole exercise is, of course, another lesson to lecturers that it is up to managers, not academics, to define what truth is in the modern Australian university. Academics are required to make a mockery of the most fundamental reason for their existence. If George Orwell were alive today, he might be tempted to write a sequel to *1984* and base it on Australia's universities.

WHAT SORT OF PEOPLE are these managers, those who take their cues from those above and impose their superiors' and their own wills on those below? The best of them, those whose values might have been instilled in them at other Australian universities in a bygone era—or, just as likely, at one or more overseas universities more recently—are uneasy about the new priorities and practices that have permeated Australian universities and do what they can to mitigate the deleterious effects of corporatisation, commercialisation and managerialism on people they might genuinely think of as colleagues. But the worst of them are an entirely new breed.

Five or so years ago Tony Coady, who was at the forefront of opposition to the Dawkins Revolution even before it was launched, wrote how dispiriting it was to observe "the enthusiasm with which so many university authorities have embraced the new culture and the power it has given them". Now Margaret Thornton talks about the "serial bully" and the "psychopathic manager" who possesses "the characteristics of glibness, hypocrisy, insensitivity, insecurity and immaturity". (One wonders why officiousness, opportunism and self-importance are not included in the list.) Most of all they are people who have become adept at "working the system". The "new managerialism" dominating Australian universities has not merely opened up a career avenue for such people but virtually provided a comforting ideology to support them.

It might be argued that claims made here do not apply equally to all of Australia's forty or so universities. True, the evils they describe are perhaps increasingly apparent as one moves away from the "Group of Eight" and focuses on "the tail end". However, and to answer Jan Currie, all the indications are that the relentless march of managerialism has still a long way to go. Academe in Australia has been infected by this disease and is steadily being destroyed by it. The values that at least some, if not many academics used to have are slowly being replaced by those that people in business have always had.

The typical university in today's Australia wants staff who do what they are told rather than those who think independently or might behave in an eccentric or idiosyncratic way. "Collegiality" is lauded in theory but cronyism and conformity, even moral cowardice and sycophancy, are rewarded in practice. Morale amongst academic staff in Australian universities is almost certainly at an all-time low. While the physical conditions under which academics work have probably never been better, the cultural climate in which they pursue their disciplines has never been worse. As some observers have noted, a climate of fear pervades Australian universities; its most obvious product is what we might best call conformist cynicism.

Most academics might once have believed that it was their responsibility to be leaders; now they are told that they owe it to the university which employs them to be followers. They are under enormous pressure to turn a blind eye to what they believe is the truth and to accept what managerialists tell them is the truth. If their university slavishly follows the market and wants above all to have "a good image", then so must they. If their university favours form over content, appearance over reality, shallowness over depth, cursoriness over thoroughness, success over striving, glibness over honesty, then so should they. To date the trend is going almost entirely managerialists' way.

Australian academics who can seem to be going overseas in unprecedented numbers; some I know have simply cut short their careers and resigned. Untold others who can't do either are afraid of losing their jobs if they don't go along with the new dictates. Of the latter many are doing little more than they must and looking forward to the day when they can retire or, if they are lucky, be offered a voluntary early retirement or redundancy "package". Few older lecturers are prepared now to recommend an academic career to the young.

Since the 1990s, to be an academic in Australia is to some extent—depending upon where you work—to be living a lie. The only hope seems to be the sort of warnings that Thornton, Currie, Nilsen, Dennis Tourish and several others are giving. But as long as we fail to recognise that managerialism in Australia's tertiary education system today doesn't simply foster bullying but *is* bullying, the trends discussed here will worsen and we will need to tackle the question that Nilsen effectively poses: if our tertiary education institutions are no longer universities, why should we go on calling them such? *Malcolm Saunders wrote "The Bullies and the Bullied" on the state of the universities, first in the March 2005 issue:*