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The academic role: Service, compliance, freedom

Paula Baron
La Trobe University, Australia
p.baron@latrobe.edu.au

Lillian Corbin
University of New England, Australia
lcorbin@une.edu.au

In this paper, we reflect upon the rise of neoliberalism and performativity in the tertiary sector and the possibilities for the exercise of authenticity and academic freedom in this environment. We argue that the rise of performativity has not only implications for university quality, but also implications for the wellbeing of academics. We base this argument in a substantial body of literature from the law well-being movement that highlights the poor prospects for individual productivity and well-being when core values are ignored or subverted in order to adhere to a particular role.

Keywords: neoliberalism; performativity; academic freedom

Introduction

As neoliberalism increases its hold upon universities, academics are increasingly subject to control, surveillance, audit and performance management. They are enmeshed in “performativity”, justifying their professional existence in terms of tangible outputs. Core values of professional academic life, authenticity and academic freedom, appear to be eroding rapidly.

In this paper, we reflect upon the rise of neoliberalism and performativity in the tertiary sector and the possibilities for the exercise of authenticity and academic freedom in this environment. We argue that, for many academics, professional satisfaction and well-being demand the exercise of authenticity and academic freedom. We base this argument in a substantial body of literature from the law well-being movement that highlights the poor prospects for the individual when core values are ignored or subverted in order to adhere to a particular role.

The paper begins by outlining neoliberalism and its impact upon universities. From here, the paper turns to the impact of neoliberalism on the role of the academic and the rise of performativity. Finally, the paper considers the concepts of authenticity and academic freedom, their significance and the ways in which they might be pursued “in the spaces”.

Before we proceed, it is important to clarify some key terms used in this paper: “performativity” is “the optimization of the global relationship between input and output” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 11), measured by the principle of “the production of proof”. At the core of the notion of performativity is artificiality, the prioritisation of ‘performance’ over authenticity, a phenomenon considered by writers such as Blackmore and Ball. Blackmore (2009), for instance, suggests that universities have established policies, processes and
procedures in order to produce data as proof for auditing purposes, but these are “staged performances” that are very rarely reflective of “real practice” and are “worrisome data-gathering exercises” (p. 862). Similarly, Ball (2003) argues performativity creates “a culture and a mode of regulation” (p. 216) that he calls “fabrications” (p. 224), and environments that resemble a “spectacle, or game-playing, or cynical compliance” (p. 222). “Authenticity” we thus use in its standard dictionary sense in opposition to ‘performativity’, that is, as a condition of being genuine or real.

“Academic freedom” we define as the liberty to teach, research and discuss knowledge without political or institutional restriction or interference. The concept of academic freedom has legislative support in both New Zealand and Australia. In New Zealand the term ‘academic freedom’ is defined in some detail in the Education Act 1989, s161. In Australia, the concept is expressed broadly in the Higher Education Support Act 2003 s 19.115, which requires each higher education provider to ‘have a policy that upholds free intellectual inquiry in relation to learning, teaching and research’. Similarly, the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards, 2011, s C1.1) also uses general language, requiring universities applying for renewal of registration to establish they have implemented procedures and approaches that promote free intellectual/academic inquiry.

As we use the term “academic freedom” it encompasses two fundamental concepts: the notion of the public good; and professional autonomy. Academic freedom fosters the public good by encouraging public discourse and the pursuit of a democratic culture (Giroux, 2002, p. 432). In her pursuit of academic freedom, the academic is a ‘public citizen’, fostering political literacy; community involvement; and exercising social and moral responsibility in developing and defending knowledge (p. 300). Along with such responsibility, academics traditionally enjoyed professional autonomy. Interference, in the form of regulation and/or requirements to account by those pursuing political or economic interests, was considered antithetical to the academic role (Menard, 1997, p. 8). This autonomy gave rise to “collegial governance”, whereby academics had considerable decision-making power in the workplace (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 325) and academic leaders observed the professional work of their staff at a distance. They assumed those staff were driven neither by them, nor by rules or by surveillance, but by a desire ... to make a contribution to knowledge in their chosen area and a desire for personal freedom. (Davies, 2003, p. 92).

For the purposes of this paper, we have used Harvey’s (2005) definition of “neoliberalism”:

… a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (p. 3)

Neoliberalism resembles the classical understanding of liberalism: individuals are assumed to be rational and economically self-interested; individuals, rather than government, should regulate their interactions; an idealised view of the market; and a commitment to free trade (Olssen & Peters, 2005 pp. 314-315). However, it has certain distinguishing features: an emphasis on the state’s role to create and facilitate the market (p. 315); loss of alternatives to the free market; the integration of production chains across national borders; the emergence of
knowledge-based forms of property; and the development of large service sectors (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009, p. 157).

For the purposes of our paper, it is important to highlight the observation that neoliberalism is not only an economic and political movement, but a moral one as well. As neoliberalism values market exchange as an ethic per se (Harvey, 2005, p. 3), it has influenced social relations (Braedley & Luxton, 2010, pp. 3 and 6), valorising individualism, freedom of choice, and competition (pp. 8-9). In neoliberalism, the individual is required “to engage in constant acts of personal responsibility, choice and risk analysis in order to be an acceptable moral being and a proper citizen” (Ward, 2011, p.185).

**Neoliberalism and its rise in the tertiary sector**

For neoliberal governments, knowledge is a “critical element in business innovation and international competitive advantage” (Duncan, 2007, p. 229). Indeed, “knowledge has become the revolutionary trading commodity” (Thornton, 2005, p. 268). Where knowledge is perceived as ‘capital’ (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 330), universities become the means to achieve economic transformation (Duncan, 2007, p. 230). Higher education has thus been at the forefront of the neoliberal project (Canaan & Shumar, 2008, p. 3).

In particular, neoliberal tertiary education policy is driven by two assumptions: that education is a product that can be bought and sold (Blum & Ullman, 2012, p. 367); and that universities should produce specialized, highly trained global knowledge-workers (Canaan & Shumar, 2008, pp. 4-5), who are “ideologically compliant” (Kumar & Hill, 2009, pp. 1 and 3). On the basis of these assumptions, and in light of the withdrawal of state funding, universities globally have become increasingly competitive and profit-driven, evolving from public service institutions to “global knowledge providers” (Menzies & Newson, 2007, p. 85), organised on the basis of “decentralisation, evaluation, accountability and privatisation” (Alcântara, Llomovatte & Romão, 2013, p. 128).

Australia is no exception to this trend, “intense downward pressure” on higher education funding occurring from the late 1970s (Knight & Trowler, 2000, as cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 578). Largely as a response to the altered economic environment, universities increasingly transformed themselves from public service institutions to competitive trading corporations, moving from notions of ‘governance’ to those of ‘management’ (Anderson, 2006, p. 578; Davies, 2003, p. 96). The Dawkins reforms in 1988 gave impetus to this trend by indicating that universities would be encouraged to implement “strong managerial modes of operation” and “streamlined decision-making processes” (Anderson, 2006, citing Dawkins, 1988, p. 579). In 2003, the Nelson Report indicated that universities should “become self-reliant, economically efficient ‘businesses’ competing with each other in a ‘free market’” (Pick, 2006, p. 232) and in 2008 the Bradley Report, although emphasising equity objectives, adopted a market discourse, assuming that students act as consumers who want choice in tertiary education; that government funding will follow student demand; and that universities will be rewarded financially if they meet agreed outcomes that ensure the competitiveness of Australian higher education.

The Commonwealth Government’s adoption of neoliberalism has thus meant that universities are increasingly expected to raise their own revenue, reducing the need for public funding (Kandiko, 2010, p. 156). Where funds are available, universities must compete to access those scarce resources; and must be accountable for expenditure. Universities have thus become focussed on efficiency and risk-minimisation, a focus exacerbated by the introduction of the
Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in 2002, and its successor, the Teaching Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA). Collectively, such developments have led to a tertiary sector characterised by what Lyotard termed “performativity”.

**Performativity and higher education**

Pursuant to these developments in universities, academic governance has changed. The traditional model of collegial governance in universities has given way to managerialism, “the adoption of approaches, systems, and techniques commonly found in the private sector, to the management and conduct of the public sector, with a particular emphasis on an enhanced role for managers” (Anderson, 2006, p. 579). University managerialism has been described as a ‘low trust’ business model (Anderson, 2006, p. 579; Barry et al, 2001, p. 92) requiring managers to monitor closely academic productivity. Managerialism in universities thus uses a variety of techniques and technologies “designed to measure, monitor and control” (Barry et al, 2001, p. 91). In its transfer of the locus of power from academics to auditors, policy makers and statisticians, neoliberalism is said to involve “the most significant shift in the discursive construction of professional practice and professional responsibility” that academics will ever experience (Davies, 2003, citing Rose, 1999, p. 91). Academics are thus increasingly subject to these technologies of control, surveillance, audit and performance management. Their professional worth is determined by measurement of tangible outputs capable of quantification. Intangible activities such as reflection, contemplation and mentoring others are deemed unproductive and therefore lacking value (Thornton, 2005, p. 271).

Performativity permeates every aspect of academic work. Work time is planned and audited through workload planning and performance management systems, which demand ‘proof’ of productivity. Courses and subjects are determined by proof of their use value (“what use is it? ... Is it saleable?” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 51); “how will it enhance the performance of people and organisations?” (Usher, 2006, p. 281)). The knowledge produced by neoliberal universities is measured by how closely this knowledge meets the needs of industry and employers (Roberts, 1998, p. 5/14). This has resulted in a prioritisation of departments, courses and units that are profitable, efficient, and enjoy student demand, and a concomitant loss of areas predominantly concerned with social issues, such as critical theory and feminism, which are seen as being nothing more than ‘ornamental’ (Giroux, 2001, p. 434).

Pedagogy is increasingly determined by proof of efficiency. Teaching methods that pose a drain on resources are not supported. For instance, a recent consultation communication circulated (ironically) by the manager of a teaching and learning department at a regional university advised of the economic reasons for the closure of a small department, one of which was the cost of supporting the printing and return of mid-semester assignments. The manager recommended that academics should substitute assessments such as assignments and examinations with more cost-effective online alternatives such as multiple choice questions, quizzes and video presentations (University staff communication, November 15, 2013).

University teaching quality is measured by generic graduate evaluations, such as the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), the results of which are published annually in the Good Guide to Universities and used by the Department of Education to fund universities.

Universities now must “demonstrate the value of their research activities... They must enact or perform accountability and relevance” (Usher, 2006, pp. 285-286), a prioritisation of performance over knowledge (Roberts, 2007, p. 358). In the process of ‘proof’, knowledge is
increasingly standardised, publications being categorised according to particular codes. At the individual level, counting mechanisms, such as grant success, the number of publications, citation statistics and journal rankings identify the ‘active researcher’ (Usher, 2006, p. 286). There is intense pressure to gain external funding, either from nationally competitive schemes or, more controversially, from commercial sources.

Routine administration or ‘administrivia’ is increasingly devolved to academics as administrative support roles in universities are reduced (Anderson, 2006, p. 580). At the same time, administration has increased with the market orientation of universities, which brings with it notions of ‘consumers’ or ‘purchasers’ to be recruited and serviced; and with the growth of compliance resulting from the proliferation of quality assurance mechanisms and performance indicators (Anderson, 2006, p. 580).

In summary, academics are increasingly expected to “perform”: achieve research and teaching excellence, produce measurable outputs, shoulder increasing compliance burdens, respond to student and societal needs (Houston et al, 2006, p. 17) and display ‘entrepreneurialism’ (Thornton, 2005, p. 31). This pressure is intense and highly individualised, that is, academic performance is assessed in a way that ordinarily ignores structural factors, such as underfunding, poor staff/student ratios, high teaching loads and inadequate administrative support.

The Importance of authenticity and academic freedom

Such developments have potentially negative implications for the quality of teaching and learning and the sustainability of universities. These have been acknowledged elsewhere (Bell et al, 2012, p. 28; Menzies & Newson, 2007, p. 94; Anderson, 2006, p. 580). Our concern here, however, is that, as performativity has strengthened its hold in universities, the core values of academic work - authenticity and academic freedom - appear to be eroding rapidly, with implications for individual academics and their well-being. We argue that, for many academics, adherence to their core value structure demands the exercise of authenticity and academic freedom. We base this argument in the substantial literature relating to lawyer and law student well-being which is not well known in the wider academy. It is thus necessary to outline this work.

There is now a considerable body of literature specific to legal education and the practice of law that addresses the phenomenon of distress in the profession. The apparently deleterious impact of legal education upon student well-being has been observed for around 30 years in US law schools (see, for instance, Shanfield et al, 1985; Andrew et al, 1986). Studies have continued to show that, in comparison to other student cohorts including medical students, law students appear to be more prone to stress and anxiety, and potentially, mental disorders (Heins, Fahey & Leiden, 1984; Helmers et al, 1997; although Leahy et al, 2010, suggests that high levels of depression, stress and anxiety may now be common to tertiary students regardless of discipline). Studies also show that distress persists into legal practice (Jolly-Ryan, 2009). American lawyers experience higher levels of unhappiness than members of other professions or trades (Levit & Linder, 2008). They suffer severe rates of depression (Hourigan, 2011) and evidence a high incidence of substance abuse (Jolly-Ryan, 2009) and suicide (Hourigan, 2011). Similar findings have been made in Australia, both in relation to law students (Kelk et al, 2009; Townes O’Brien et al, 2011a & 2011b; Antolak-Saper et al, 2011) and to the legal profession (Kelk et al, 2009; Beaton Consulting, 2011).
Although the causes of this phenomenon of distress have not been definitively determined, much investigation has focussed on the importance of intrinsic motivation, authenticity and professional values as fostering well-being. A leader in this area, Krieger (2005, p. 427) observes:

\[ \text{[t]hose values and motivations that promote or attend professionalism have been empirically shown to correlate with well-being and life satisfaction, while those that undermine or discourage professionalism empirically correlate with distress and dissatisfaction.} \]

Identifying high workloads, a competitive environment and a focus on extrinsic motivation as likely to compromise health, productivity and work satisfaction, Krieger (2002, p. 126) argues for institutional environments conducive to well-being as those that: promote “authenticity, relatedness, competence, self-esteem and security”; focus on intrinsic, rather than extrinsic motivations; and encourage “personal growth, intimacy, community enhancement and altruism”.

It is not difficult to see how the current university environment runs counter to these recommendations and the ways in which the rise of performativity, outlined above, conflicts with core values of authenticity and academic freedom. Studies repeatedly show that academics place significant importance upon their work, particularly their research, which results in the lines between work and personal life and between personal and professional accomplishment, being blurred (Anderson, 2006, p. 585). Studies show that autonomy and flexibility in the workplace are very important to them (Anderson, 2006, p. 587; Jacobs & Winslow, 2004, p. 107). Academics have high levels of intrinsic motivation, particularly in relation to research, and seek to engage in the production of research for its own sake, regardless of whether that has an immediate market value. Authenticity is thus a matter of personal, as well as professional significance. Academics also place value upon time for creative thinking and ethical reflection, but as Ball (2006, p. 11) observes, in the current environment:

\[ \text{[e]thical reflection is rendered obsolete in the process for goal attainment, performance improvement and budget maximisations ... Value replaces values, except where it can be shown that values add value.} \]

Most academics also view teaching and learning as something more than of vocational value, emphasising the fundamental importance of ideas and theories (Blackmore, 2009, p. 867). Little wonder, then, that studies show academics to be stressed, anxious and demoralized (Anderson, 2008, citing Anderson, Johnson & Saha, 2002, p. 252) as these fundamental values of the profession are undermined. Reasoning from the findings of the law well-being movement, the exercise of authenticity and academic freedom are not only matters of principle but of necessity for well-being and job satisfaction. University managers would be well-advised to consider the institutional environments likely to produce well-being (and enhance productivity) as outlined above. In the absence of institutional change, however, it is important to find the “spaces” where academics can exercise their authenticity and academic freedom, despite the ubiquity of neoliberal managerial practices. This is not without its challenges.
**Authenticity and freedom “in the spaces”**

Despite concerns about neoliberal managerialism and its detrimental impact on academics, there has been a relatively high level of compliance to date by academics. Writers offer a number of reasons for this: firstly, neoliberalism can be seductive: its “reasonableness” and its rhetorical objectives of “transparency”, or “quality” or “accountability” difficult to resist (Shaw, 2008, p.291). Secondly, dissent is often simply not tolerated and the tendencies of managerialism “to eclipse other discourses” and “to normalise its practices and to silence dissent” has attracted comment (Davies, 2003, citing Dennis, 1995, 102). Many dissenting academics have left the sector (voluntarily or otherwise) leaving a more compliant workforce behind. Thirdly, resistance may look like compliance: Anderson (2006) notes that a phenomenon unique to the academic workforce is that “rather than ‘fiddling’ time from their employers as manual workers do, [academics] ‘fiddle’ it from themselves (p. 587), working evenings and weekends as well as long days.

Despite this apparent compliance, resistance and efforts to counter neoliberalism are emerging in the literature. McGregor (2009) observes that academics are ‘gatekeepers’ leading to “either social reproduction or social transformation” (p. 348). Giroux (2002) argues that higher education is a democratic public sphere “where students can learn the power of questioning authority, recover the ideals of engaged citizenship, reaffirm the importance of the public good, and expand their capacities to make a difference” (p. 450). Thornton (2005) observes that some academics will continue to exert their academic freedom, even it means redundancy (p. 273): “Why did they become academics, after all, if it was not to lead the life of an intellectual, untrammelled by the need to satisfy the exigencies of demonstrated use value or designated research priorities?”

Is resignation the only alternative? Are there possibilities for the exercise of authenticity and academic freedom? As Roberts (2013) suggests, academics cannot “return to a romanticized version of the university of the past” but they can look for spaces to discuss the gaps between reality and ideals (p. 41). Understanding and critically analysing these gaps may provide opportunities for the exercise of authenticity and academic freedom by operating in ‘insubordinate’ (Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013, pp. 9-10) or ‘radical’ spaces (McGregor, 2009, p. 348).

... places where evidence and argument matter more than influence, where original and generative thinking is more highly valued than entertainment, where independent researchers ask and answer important question without interference from their funding sources. (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013, p. 17).

These spaces can be discussions within the university, in communities of practice (Avis, 2005, p. 214), or spaces where academics can engage “with the experiences, actions, and ideas” of community groups who are striving to bring about social change (Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013, p. 21). These are the spaces for the exercise of authenticity.

**Conclusion**

Lyotard famously argued that the adoption of the principles of performativity will result in the ‘death of the professor’.

[T]he process of delegitimation and the predominance of the performance
criterion are sounding the knell of the age of the Professor: a professor is no more competent than memory bank networks in transmitting established knowledge, nor more competent than interdisciplinary teams in imagining new moves or new games (Lyotard, 1984, p. 53).

If the academic role becomes inauthentic, and academic freedom is lost, this prediction may well be true. The current tertiary environment is not conducive to reflection, critique and dialogue, to autonomy and flexibility, to learning and knowledge as goods in themselves, not merely means to an end. But these values must be pursued in the interests of the academy as a whole, and the wellbeing of academics individually.

References


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