

The death of the uni

COMMENT



Academic freedom is under renewed threat, and the enemy comes from within.

IN HIS 1996 Boyer Lectures, Pierre Ryckmans declared the Australian university dead. He did not mean that the higher education sector was not larger or more costly or even, from a certain point of view, more vigorous than it had ever been. What he meant was that the "idea" of the university had, in Australia, passed peacefully away.

Reality frequently has the capacity to overtake satire. In his lectures Ryckmans wondered whether car mechanics might not soon be taught at university. Even he, however, might have been surprised by the recent news that Deakin University had signed a deal with Coles Myer. Students would be taught, it was announced, everything from supermarket management to shelf-stacking. The fact that shelf-stacking can be accepted as a suitable university subject is no minor matter. It is a conceptual catastrophe — one telling sign that the traditional idea of the university in Australia is now dead.

Perhaps Ryckmans had something else in mind. Not so long ago the university was still thought of as an unworldly place — where academics and students were engaged in the pursuit of learning; where the university's system of government was an idiosyncratic one, based around the idea of academic collegiality; where the university was fiercely independent of the state and fiercely protective, too, of the ideal of "academic freedom".

Over the years university unworldliness has collapsed. In its place, the universities have been encouraged by government to remodel themselves on new corporate lines. The universities have, without noticeable resistance, agreed.

The internal affairs of the contemporary corporate university are no longer governed by colleges of academics but by a separate caste of university administrators, headed by powerful figures, vice-chancellors, who regards themselves not so much as fellow academics but as the CEOs of



businesses' of a special kind. Universities now openly advertise their wares. Each claims to sell a unique product. Universities now enthusiastically compete with each other for students, especially of the full fee-paying kind.

Universities no longer even pretend to have an autonomy from government, even though, paradoxically, governments now provide them with a smaller proportion of their funds than in the days when autonomy was more real. Long ago they accepted the right of government to influence their choice of course offerings. Long ago they accepted — in response to the genuine problems of taxpayer accountability — the reasonableness of government demands for an endless flow of

statistical information called "performance indicators", of a frequently misleading kind. Much scholarly energy these days is expended in self-boosting; much scholarly ingenuity in the filling out of forms.

As a consequence of the university's embrace of the corporate model of governance ("we decide, you perform"), relations between administrators and academics have grown decidedly cool. A generation ago, C.P. Snow deplored the existence of "two cultures" at the university — the sciences and the humanities. Today university life is being soured by a wall of mutual incomprehension between two quite different cultures — the corporate culture of the administrative branch, and the collegial culture of

those who research and teach.

Because of the administrative enforcement of the corporate model, relations between academics and their students are less intimate than they once were. Academics have been encouraged to think of their students as "clients", and to teach as many of these clients as efficiently as possible without wasting time. In such an atmosphere, the cultivation of friendly relations between teacher and student is becoming rarer. From a rational economic point of view, idle conversation with clients is a misuse of scarce resources. From an educational point of view nothing is of greater worth.

Nowhere, however, is the consequence of new university corporatism seen more clearly than

in the spate of recent disputes between professors and administrators over questions concerned with academic freedom.

In July 1998, the board of Melbourne University Press vetoed the publication of a book concerning universities. Rumors had reached the board that the book defended the "traditional" idea of the university "without clear or sufficient representation from the proponents of countervailing views". Three months later, the Vice-Chancellor at Monash University threatened to evict a retired professor, John Legge, from his university room on the grounds that he had abused the hospitality of the university by speaking at a rally protesting against the withdrawal of funds for the study of the humanities. And last month, the administrators at the Victoria University of Technology temporarily suspended the access of Professor Allen Patience to the university's e-mail service, and threatened to serve him with a defamation writ, after he circulated to his colleagues sharp criticism of the university's decision to allocate each year \$100,000 for the rental of a Docklands stadium corporate box.

These controversies have a common theme. Academic freedom is not under some general threat. Academics are still, generally, free to determine the lines of their research or to express their views. One subject, however, is becoming taboo. When academics feel obliged to speak about developments at their own university, or about the corruption of the university ethos, academic freedom comes abruptly to an end.

Academics who criticise universities are nowadays treated like mischievous employees who have been disloyal to the firm. There is, in effect, they are told, no place for public criticism when universities are competing for financial rewards from government or business and for public esteem. So deeply have university administrators internalised the values of corporate culture that they no longer seem to understand why it is that academics, who cherish the traditions of the university, not only have a right but are under an obligation to speak their minds.

Academic freedom was once thought necessary to protect the university from the interference of church, society and state. Today it is necessary again, but this time to protect academics from the requirement of silence coming from within the university's own walls.

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