

Re-Positioning University Governance and Academic Work

Jill Blackmore, Marie Brennan and Lew Zipin (Eds.)

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The past three decades have witnessed radical changes to universities, largely due to the influence of neoliberal ideology. This edited volume shows how university governance and academic work has become infused with the discourse of the market; institutions compete for social prestige and economic resources; students have become customers; and the daily life of academics has been opened up to close scrutiny under the banners of quality assurance and enhancement, and accountability.

The book charts the impact of shifts in policy contexts on university operations through multi-layered analysis. A number of chapters cover the macro-level, showing how systems have responded to the challenges of rankings, internationalisation, aligning research with the so-called 'knowledge economy', and public accountability. Others look at the meso-level, examining the changes within individual institutions as managerialism takes root. The micro-level is addressed in chapters that study the impacts on individuals as teachers, researchers and middle managers. This analytical framework lends coherence to the book and provides the reader with in-depth insights into the causes and effects of the transformations that have taken place in universities.

Most of the illustrative examples in the volume are drawn from Australian universities, supplemented by case studies from Singapore and Ontario, as well as references to England, New Zealand, USA and other contexts. However, it does not set out to be a comparative study of the diversity of responses to neoliberal ideology; instead, it shows the emergence of common trends across the different contexts. Simon Marginson's chapter on the origins and status of global university rankings helps to explain this convergence. Although the various ranking schemes, such as those carried out by the US News and World Report, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the Times Higher Education Supplement, and the Centre for Higher Education Development in Germany, are intended to serve different purposes and are based on often highly contestable indicators, they have contributed to a world order in higher education characterised by a spirit of competition—what Marginson terms a "knowledge economy World Cup"—and to the positioning of universities as economic actors in an international marketplace, subject to a performance culture and other accountability systems. Another emergent trend that promotes convergence is international collaboration. Ravinder Sidhu contrasts the experiences of two world-class universities who sought to take advantage of the Singaporean government's policy of establishing the city-state as a regional knowledge

hub. The study shows the complexities of transnational partnerships: what works in one context cannot be simply transposed to another without significant adjustments at every level, from policies to interpersonal relationships.

New forms of university governance have emerged that mimic the business sector. Kari Dehli illustrates how the formation of cost centres with one-line budgets, business plans and targets have turned university departments into mini-corporations. The adoption of market principles and the preoccupation with financial viability, Dehli contends, have not merely resulted in irritating academics by requiring them to engage in corporate entrepreneurialism, they have come to threaten the fundamental activities of scholarly enquiry, democratic debate and academic freedom. Marie Brennan elaborates on this theme by investigating the technologies of management associated with neoliberal discourses. She shows how the audit culture and standardised indicators of performance have come to determine university planning, monitoring, reporting and accountability, while the remit of units that previously played a supporting administrative role, such as human resources, has expanded to encompass management functions. Caught in the middle are Deans and Heads of Schools, who have to juggle the exigencies of senior management with the needs of staff in their care. These tensions are vividly exemplified in the chapter by Peter Bansel and Bronwyn Davies, in which "Professor James" reflects on how he, as a middle manager, navigates a course between the Scylla and Charybdis of university corporatisation and the professional aspirations of colleagues.

The expectation that university programmes should be aligned primarily with the economic needs of the state implies that academics should demonstrate the financial viability of their teaching, and the utilitarian contribution of their research. The chapter by Elizabeth Bullen, Jane Kenway and Johannah Fahey traces the dubious appropriation of Peter Drucker's term, 'knowledge economy' by policymakers, resulting in a strong linkage between education and economic growth, and the tendency for governments to shape and circumscribe the research environment in universities in ways that prioritise the application of research through 'knowledge transfer'. Jill Blackmore picks up on this theme and examines the nature of research assessment. She shows how attempts to impose a quality assurance culture are riddled with tensions and contradictions, and, although these moves have resulted in increased investment in research, they have also privileged 'hard' sciences and restricted women's opportunities to work as research leaders. Alison Lee and Catherine Manathunga relate how the discourses and strategies related to the knowledge economy have affected teaching, the "core business" of universities in modern corporate discourse. They argue that, as with research, teaching has been conceptualised for the purposes of transparency, auditing and accountability in narrow ways—concentrating, for instance, on elements such as

student satisfaction, the alignment of the curriculum with graduate attributes, and learner-centredness—and that the emphasis on measurable performance fails to encapsulate fully the complex messiness of pedagogy.

The book's portrayal of the metamorphosis (the use of “re-positioning” in the title is an understatement) of university governance and academic work has a strong undercurrent of dissatisfaction, as the chapters point to the wreckage created by an ideology constructed on very tenuous premises. The final chapter by Lew Zipin reviews three key texts, by Bauman, Readings and Worsham, that represent early responses to and protests against the transformations. Zipin notes how passively academics seem to have accepted the changes, although this does not imply a lack of resistance. He suggests that the emotional traumas experienced by academics, coupled with critical reflection and ethical courage, provide powerful means for breaking free from the shackles of neoliberalism, which, he argues, is currently vulnerable, given the financial crises of recent years. Zipin chooses not to explore alternatives at this stage, but this book provides an excellent resource for those who wish to engage in imagining better approaches to university governance and academic work.

Professor Bob Adamson

Dept of International Education & Lifelong Learning
Hong Kong Institute of Education