

THE ACADEMIC MANIFESTO

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Preface

It is probable that most people will have little interaction with academics except on a university campus; they are a relatively small segment of the Australian population, one that may be distinguished from non-academics by a cluster of features.

The prototypical academic is a person dedicated to a field, or fields, of knowledge, who addresses a question, or a series of questions, about our universe, our planet and/or our lives for much if not all his or her career. Their often compulsive quests for answers, which are never completed, may begin well before their postgraduate studies, and, in some case, extend far beyond retirement, ending only with their death. Academics may be anything from shy and retiring individuals to charming extroverts and social intercourse with them may proceed as normal, until, that is, a word that nobody else knows the meaning of, is dropped into the conversation or an idea from out of left field is expressed. If encountered when a light has just been cast on long unsolved problems, when they are thoroughly engrossed in their scholarship, or pondering a long awaited research result, conversation may be inhibited by a distracted silence or sometimes, a tediously detailed monologue. Academics feel compelled to share their knowledge and do so through direct instruction, Socratic-like guidance and written communication. Their knowledge helps develop the sciences, arts, law, medicine, commerce, industry and technology, and, potentially, the betterment of human kind. Academics also, incidentally perhaps, model their self, providing a vision of an alternative form of being both to each other and to their students.

A Complaint

A spectre is haunting the world in which academics exist. In recent decades, radical changes have taken place in this world, arising largely from a hegemonic neoliberal philosophy that attempts to turn universities from places of learning, where a well-educated citizenry might once have flourished, to barren institutions, where utility is the only value. These changes have been, and continuously are, undermining the conditions that make a creative academy and socially responsible university possible.

Academics must, by the very nature of their work, experiment, change, rearrange and create, whether this is in their roles as teachers or researchers. Increasingly, however, the freedom required to proceed in this way is being curtailed. Mistakes, which are a necessary concomitant of experimentation and change, are punished. Research, teaching and scholarship, more generally, are increasingly directed by outsiders with very different purposes. Though lip service may still be paid to the value of pure research, now 'rebranded' as 'blue sky research', academics are encouraged, if not forced, to direct their efforts to topics deemed to be of political and/or commercial interest. Unit descriptions are now legal documents that prevent, among other things, last minute changes to teaching content and

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forms of assessment. The rigidity of this arrangement delays the introduction into a class of the latest developments in educational, political, social and scientific domains.

Students have always, perhaps, been motivated by concerns other than scholarship during their undergraduate years, but those years once provided a time for even the most indifferent to learn something about themselves and the directions they might take in life. Currently, these years are sold to tax payers, and their children, as a means of becoming 'job ready', an impoverishing vision of what a university is or might be. Increasingly, students appear to see university not so much as a place to learn but as an entree ticket to a high paying job. In such an environment as this, an academic is not so much a source of knowledge, as a help, or hindrance, to a brilliant career. Lectures, rather than understood as guides to new worlds of experience, are treated as 'boring' exercises to be avoided, an avoidance that is encouraged by the increasing emphasis on on-line teaching by our administrators. Insofar as academics are expected to give lectures, a near empty lecture theatre signals a profound disrespect for the academic who has often spent hours, if not weeks, in preparation. The publication of student evaluations of teaching online and their dissemination to administrators have, in their potential for unfair criticism and ridicule, an adverse effect on teaching, as well as on the teachers themselves. Student driven teaching awards position academics as show ponies rather than as scholars and scientists dedicated to their vocation. The current emphasis on 'student satisfaction' not only demeans the academic but undermines the teaching process; there must be a stick as well as a carrot in the student teacher relationship. The sustained attention that the analysis of complex issues requires is not easily learned. Academic lectures may well be 'boring', at first. Once a way of active listening is learned, however, a whole new world of thought, one that is essential if we are to address the dilemmas of our times, becomes accessible.

We are not happy working in the kind of university that UWA is today. We want to be a part of a university that values what we are able to do. We do not want to be subjected to, and injured by, retrospective measures that reflect, not our career long endeavours, but the latest fads in university executive culture or government edicts. Nor do we want to be subjected to changes that arise from the latest fads in education 'theory'; we want change but we want it to arise from our needs and the genuine needs of our students and our species. We want to teach students who, even though they may not comprehend just what we teach or what value arises from it, appreciate our efforts and strive to better understand our subject matter. Most of us believe research to be a necessary aspect of our work, however much teaching we do, and are puzzled by an institution that requires research from their academics without providing the means for them to engage in this activity. We are appalled that an institution with such prestige relies so heavily on the free labour of its academics; the annualized 37.5 hour work week of our current Agreement is only a well-known fiction. Overall, we want an environment that encourages mutual respect between academics and administrators and between academics and students.

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Our Entreaties

We believe that three new arrangements, in particular, are sufficiently radical to change the current campus environment to one in which we would again enjoy our work and feel proud of being an academic at the University of Western Australia:

1. Firstly, we believe that it is necessary to change the relationship between academics and students. To this end we suggest that students be marked only at the end of a three or four year course of study. The Guild requirement that feedback be provided at the half way mark of any semester should also be set aside. These are rarely, if ever, of any predictive value. Each discipline would devise an appropriate form of assessment for this mark. We recognize that some disciplines might feel it necessary to include some mid-course assessment. This necessity should not require other disciplines to do so, however. No quotas on marks should be set. Failing marks should be a real possibility. We believe this arrangement will change student perceptions of academics and relieve academics of countless hours of largely futile effort (the majority of students want to know what their marks are, not what they should have done on an assignment).

Because graduating UWA students should be able to write clearly and grammatically, we suggest that all entering students be examined on their writing ability. The Centre for Education Futures would administer and mark this exam pass/fail. Those students failing this exam would be required to take a remedial English class run by the Centre for Education Futures. Their attendance would be required until they were able to pass the exam. A similar arrangement might be appropriate to ensure the mathematical literacy of our students.

2. The University should emphasize and reward research, not grant income. Each continuing academic should receive a yearly research stipend. The amount might vary by discipline. Academics requiring funds greater than the stipend would continue to apply to ARC and NHMRC. Occasional Teaching Relief should be provided to academics whose research requires fieldwork. Sabbatical leave should be maintained. Publication, however, should not be a condition of receiving it or a required outcome.

3. Finally, we do not see any advantage to running a university like K-Mart. We would like to see fewer Senators with backgrounds in commerce and more from the arts, sciences and socially responsible organizations. We would also like more of the Senate's deliberations to be open to appointed academic observers.

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