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International Responses to the Academic Manifesto: Reports from 14 Countries

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# International Responses to the Academic Manifesto: Reports from 14 Countries

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Report Introduction
Willem Halffman and Hans Radder

In April 2015, we published our Academic Manifesto, the slightly updated English version of an earlier Dutch article (Halffman and Radder 2013, 2015a). It described how universities are occupied by management, a regime obsessed with ‘accountability’ through measurement, increased competition, efficiency, ‘excellence’, and misconceived economic salvation. Given the occupation’s absurd side-effects, we examined how this colonization of the university came about and why it still persists. Furthermore, we sketched an alternative vision of a public university, more akin to a socially engaged knowledge commons than to a corporation. We also listed twenty concrete measures to achieve this public university. From the fact that management seemed impervious to cogent arguments, we concluded that significant change could only happen if academics take action. Hence, we explored eleven different strategies for a renewed university politics.

The article seems to have raised quite a stir over the last years. We have received supportive reactions by academics from many countries. There is now a Hungarian, a Spanish, a Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian and a Portuguese translation, while a French translation will be published shortly (Halffman and Radder 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2017, forthcoming). All translations have been made in the context of academic protests in their respective countries as a call to action. Finally, at the moment, the Minerva website mentions 19K downloads of the Manifesto—which is quite exceptional for this type of journal.

On our part, these facts suggested the need for a follow-up. Apparently, the problems of academia we analyzed from a Dutch perspective were not limited to the Netherlands. Therefore, it seemed important to have a more detailed view of the current predicament of higher education in a range of different countries. For this purpose, we invited several colleagues who had earlier sent us a reaction to write a brief response to the Manifesto. These responses were to address the analyses, the evaluations and the proposed solutions of the Manifesto from the national perspectives of the respondents.

The aim was threefold. First, this overview would show the international dimension of the situation and could counter attempts to dismiss our criticism by claiming that the problems are merely local and incidental. Second, it would constitute an act of international solidarity and thus serve to motivate and support further forms of resistance. Third, it could help to devise effective strategies for political action by learning from each other.

As a result, we have received the reports that can be found below. Some are relatively short, others somewhat more extended. They originate from a large number of countries: Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Canada (Québec), Finland (and Scandinavia), Hungary, Japan, Spain, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and the United States. We have added to this inventory a concise piece on what has happened in the Netherlands since we published the first version of the Manifesto in 2013. Since the reports cannot be grouped in clearly different thematic clusters, we have ordered them according to the
geographical regions of the authors’ countries. We conclude this collection with a sketch of our perspective on what we call the ‘productivist university’, both on the global features and on the equally global forms of resistance that we see emerging from the fourteen country reports.

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Halffman, Willem and Hans Radder. Forthcoming. “Le Manifeste Académique.” [In French.] Translated by Michel Lacroix.
Australia: Reclaiming the Public University?
Simon Batterbury and Jason Byrne

In their provocative article, Halffman and Radder discuss the Kafkaesque worlds that academics in the Netherlands now find themselves in, as an underfunded university sector predates upon itself and its workforce (2015, 165-166). Their Academic Manifesto observes that many universities in the Netherlands have been ‘taken over’ by an ‘army of professional administrators’, who use managerialist approaches to drive performance-based objectives. The country’s tertiary institutions, they write, have become obsessively focused on ‘accountability’ and pursue neoliberal-style imperatives of ‘efficiency and excellence’. They paint a portrait of academics under siege, untrusted, and constantly micro-managed. The pursuit of so-called efficiency has involved accountability systems that are themselves wasteful, driving seemingly endless institutional restructuring. Moreover, institutions, the authors claim, have become obsessed with star-performers in research, driven by competitive targets that undergird global rankings. Metrics—publication outputs, journal quality, citations, impact and grant revenue—produce a culture of competition and sometimes, mercenary behaviours, on the part of academics and managers.

Profound changes across the tertiary sector are seen in many other countries, as this collection identifies. Many of these can be traced to shifting patterns of university funding. In the OECD countries, over the last thirty years, public higher education has been reconceived as a commodity (Watts 2016). As a result, students are now the clients, academics are customer-service providers and income earners, and many public universities have become businesses in all but name (Connell 2013). Against this backdrop, Halffman and Radder (2015) point to six major changes that have reconfigured tertiary education:

(i) Processes of benchmarking, auditing, and ‘indicator fetishism’ (e.g. targets, quotas);
(ii) A new landscape of competition (e.g. competition for students, research and teaching funding, ‘star’ professors etc.);
(iii) The casualization of university workforces and more unpaid work;
(iv) Multiple layers of management and administration, with increasing overheads in grant administration, and public relations, marketing, student support etc.;
(v) A relentless pursuit of excellence—however defined, and
(vi) Standardisation—in curricula, learning objectives, workload models, grant templates and personnel management.

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These changes in the Netherlands have led to a system that is isolating, anonymous, bureaucratised and universalising, scaffolded by ambition, greed, incompetence and a constant quest for efficiencies and more status. While there may be beacons of light, they are heavily shielded in the article, which makes for depressing reading. Halffman and Radder’s provocation prompts two questions, to which we will try to respond: How does Australia compare? And what can Australian universities and their staff do?

**Similarities and Differences**

Tertiary institutions in Australia have experienced similar changes over thirty years. There have been funding cuts, a re-prioritization of higher education, and for academics, new performance-based research and teaching assessment metrics. As academics who have worked in Australia for over a decade, and with past experience in the United States and the United Kingdom, we have encountered the same issues. One of us was based at a ‘world top 40’ university, one of Australia’s oldest and best-resourced, and the other teaches at one of Australia’s leading universities in a tier of institutions that are less than 50 years old. Confronting different challenges, both institutions have experienced staff retrenchments, departmental reorganisation, bureaucratic systems of management, and externally-imposed targets.

Australia has several universities that are recognised globally, and a relatively highly educated population (ranking higher than average among OECD countries [OECD 2017]). It has been relatively untouched so far by recent international debacles beginning to affect higher education, such as immigration restrictions under the Trump Presidency in the USA, Brexit in the United Kingdom, major security threats, or financial meltdown in some European nations. Australia actually entered the 2007 Global Financial Crisis with a budget surplus. Its national governments tend to the right, viewed historically at federal level, and are voted in by a predominantly suburban population. International students are keen to study in Australia, and until strong immigration restrictions, also had a good possibility of staying in the country if they wished. Many of the problems we identify can be traced to the contemporary functioning of universities as market institutions, with diminished public funding. The national government is not keen on supporting the costs of a large university sector, even though student participation rates have increased substantially.

**Tertiary Education Reforms**

From 1974 (under the Whitlam Labor government) until the late 1980s, attending university in Australia was free or at nominal cost. Higher education was viewed as an important part of nation-building, to develop a competitive workforce, even framed as a ‘right’. However, in 1987, universities began to implement student fees, and within the next two years began charging full fees. Under the Dawkins Reforms (Sharrock 2013), the Hawke Labor government introduced legislation to enable students to take out interest-free loans via a Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). These loans were repaid through income taxes, after a critical earnings threshold was crossed later in life. This is the situation today.
The Dawkins Reforms also restructured a two-tier sector of 19 universities and 46 colleges /institutes into a ‘unified’ sector, with close to 40 public universities—many created through mergers. Remaining technical and further education institutions (TAFE) were funded by state governments. These reforms also spurred an increase in international student recruitment, since they paid higher fees. Universities began to compete for Federal research funding—based on their performance and success in meeting national social and economic objectives. The Australian Research Council (ARC) dates to 1988 (independent from 2001), and still awards competitive research grants.

A raft of further reforms saw the growing dominance of free-market principles from the early 1990s. A demand-driven funding system was introduced by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments in 2009. This was based on the Bradley Review (Dow and Kemper 2010) of higher education in 2008, which recommended higher enrolment targets—by 2025 the aim is for 40% of 25-34 year-olds to have a university degree (with a focus on those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds). The Review also reallocated Commonwealth (federal)-funded student places, based on demand, and established a Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) to regulate teaching quality.

The ambition was for universities to reorient degrees to focus more on ‘skills development’, purportedly to meet the needs of the contemporary global economy. In 2014, a Higher Education Bill was narrowly voted down—it would have allowed universities to be ‘deregulated’, to charge what they saw fit—currently domestic student fees are capped. Universities Australia, the peak university management body, actually supported the 2014 Bill, to the dismay of students. There was only one dissenter—the Vice Chancellor of the small University of Canberra, Stephen Parker, who deemed unregulated fees to be unethical and unfair (Parker 2014). But in 2017, there are new government proposals to raise student contributions to fees, cut government funding for teaching, introduce new performance criteria, and sharpen loan repayment conditions.

Raewyn Connell (2013, 2015) traces much of the financial and bureaucratic measures in Australia back to the Dawkins reforms of the 1980s. She argues that after redesigning the tertiary sector in the ways described above,

>[t]he next step was to find someone else to pay [for funding education], and a neoliberal solution was at hand: fees. The federal government share of university funding began an astonishing collapse, from around 90 percent of university budgets at the start of the 1990s to around 45 percent now. Student fees have risen, decade after decade, to compensate. (Connell 2015, 24)

The results are striking. For example, an international PhD student at the University of Melbourne will pay around AU$36,000 (€24,555) per year in 2017 (discounting is discretionary), an international Science undergraduate AU$39,680 (€27,065), and AU$29,728 (€20,277) in Arts. At Griffith, an Arts student would pay at least AU$26,500 (€18,075). These fees, some of which are a little lower that equivalent public US universities, are not
profit-making or greedy—they are essential. Institutions have to cross-subsidise their research and teaching using revenue from international and other fee-paying students. The high Australian dollar and difficulty in sustaining international enrolments make this a difficult task.

The obvious solution, as Connell (2015) argues, is to fund universities adequately from public funds, with suitable checks and balances, given this is an affluent nation in which universities play a vital economic role. But no government has chosen this route since the 1980s, and government funding has not even kept up with inflation. Budgeting pressures cascade down to academics and professional staff. Universities, caught up in the New Public Management with its ‘metrification of ‘quality’ obsession (Lorenz 2015, 7) now vie to outcompete each other, and to attract domestic and international students based on their reputations. Australian universities have fully embraced international university rankings. Vice-Chancellors and university marketing machines are quick to publicise any improvements (online, and around the campus). Reputations are buttressed by spending on campus infrastructure (even if this is at the expense of more personnel), such as dining and recreational facilities, on-campus accommodation and so on. Some of these generate needed revenue. Capital expansion is in part to accommodate more students, but ‘quality’ of facilities and ‘student experience’ count towards rankings, thus meeting costs through enrolments.

The Wolf in Australia

Most (or a significant percentage of) academics are on some form of permanent or multi-year contracts. Most are paid adequate salaries because they are a skilled workforce and potential revenue earners. With the decline in core public funding, income generation has become just as essential as generating ‘knowledge’ and ideas, and it is a feature of annual performance evaluations at most universities. Furthermore, there is no academic tenure, which makes retrenchment possible if finances are tight (for a debate on tenure, see Batterbury 2008). The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) represents and fights to protect academics and professional staff, through collective bargaining agreements at each institution. These are hard-won. The NTEU has become increasingly important as universities have sought to respond to fiscal austerity by tightening budgets, retrenching staff, switching to online course delivery and converting the workforce to a higher percentage of (cheaper) sessional teachers and researchers, on short-term contracts. Sessional lecturers are probably doing up to half of all teaching in Australia, although figures are not available (Connell 2015). Thanks to the NTEU, the hourly rates for teaching, marking and tutorial work are generally good (much better than in North America), but as in the Netherlands and other countries, sessional academics can become trapped, with massive teaching loads and little time for their own research.

Neoliberal management has ushered in a tier of highly paid executives, suggesting cost savings are not equally distributed. Vice Chancellors (Presidents) of Australian universities now receive annual salaries of up to AU$ 1 million (€709,100). They are supported by layers of management—Deputy Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors, Deans, Assistant Deans and Heads of School, with salaries from around AU$200,000 to almost AU$500,000. The
situation varies across the sector but the irony of an over-paid echelon of managers telling overworked academics to ‘work smarter’ is not lost on academic and professional staff. As funding dries up, class sizes increase, teaching loads blow out, bureaucratic processes multiply and colleagues become retrenched or leave due to high rates of stress, anxiety and depression, why should millions be paid to management? Disputes over working conditions have yet to translate into large-scale strikes and protests—in part, because poor pay is less of an issue for the cohort of permanent academic staff than in some other countries.

Another feature of cost reduction is ‘restructuring’. This is less visible in the top-ranked universities (the Group of Eight). It is not always successful. At La Trobe University in the early 2010s, a large reduction in humanities and social sciences staffing was retracted after protest and strong action (Bode and Dale 2012). Professor Judith Bessant’s firing at RMIT University, Melbourne, was a test case of line-management power—it was overturned in the courts which found RMIT contravened the Fair Work Act, and it did not appeal (Bessant 2015). But both of us have experienced departmental and broader faculty reshuffles, regularly losing and gaining colleagues, degrees and facilities under a new ‘Business Plan’ each time. In the younger universities, some Departments have been merged into super-departments, folded into larger Schools, which sit within Faculties—each requiring oversight from a managerial class but saving on administrative posts. Research and teaching are bifurcated in some cases, where teaching is managed by Heads of School and Deans, and research by Research Centre Directors. This creates further layers of bureaucracy and fragmentation, although there are exceptions. Melbourne has created a single School of Geography for research and teaching, but only after a whole Faculty (Land and Environment) was axed and merged into two others.

Because the academics function as an income-earning resource, the professional staff are usually the first to suffer during budget shortfalls. Across the sector, Australian universities have cut functions like student support to the bone. For example, the Business Improvement Program at the University of Melbourne (2013-2016) was announced on the back of a financial shortfall. Some 540 administrative jobs were targeted for termination by 1 January 2016 (Fioritti and See-Tho 2014). We do not know how many actually went, but many people lost work, reapplied in competition with each other for fewer jobs, and functions were moved online (Campbell and Morrissey 2015). Griffith University has had rounds of retrenchments, redundancies and ‘voluntary early retirements’. Student centres at both universities and across the country, once numerous and offering personalised support for enrolments and other queries, have been downsized or replaced, in one of our institutions by AI-based ‘helplines’ such as IBM Watson. Remaining human support has been centralised and therefore reduced. IT support has also become centralised, or outsourced, with substantial job losses and oftentimes, marginal financial benefits. Mailrooms have closed, various systems automated and linked to smart phone apps, and marketing and school outreach have been consolidated and centralised. The aim is to save salary costs. Efficiency has resulted in some areas, but oftentimes with higher workloads of those remaining, and substantially less human contact and therefore conviviality.
The two universities we know best have followed different routes. Melbourne is a well-ranked university and oversubscribed with student applicants. The most pervasive result of New Public Management at Melbourne is struggles over how their fees are allocated. Faculties are given financial targets, and must meet them. But for several years now, faculties have been in competition with each other to ‘capture’ student fees. There are ‘ownership’ disputes for classes and whole degrees, with fears of ‘fee leakage’ to other faculties. This does affect student choice, often narrowing most ‘elective’ classes on a degree to those taught in the most central faculty. Arguing over undergraduate degree ‘ownership’ has continued since a major restructuring took place in the mid-2000s, the ‘Melbourne Model’. An Academic Board adjudicates, but a new degree was established in 2017, with the majority of fees accruing to one faculty, more so than the one it has essentially replaced.

At Griffith, a range of degree offerings have been consolidated into larger units—such as a generic Bachelor of Science. Similar to Melbourne faculties are becoming concerned about leaking student load and income. Unlike Melbourne, Griffith is often forced to manage its entry scores to attract enough students to ‘meet quota’. Academics then have to support and scaffold student learning, when a growing number of students (often from non-traditional backgrounds), may lack adequate study skills. This has increased rates of attrition, which are closely monitored by management, and has placed an additional burden on academics to change their assessments and course delivery mode, offer improved student experiences, follow up students with one-on-one meetings, and undertake other ‘pastoral care’ efforts to maximise retention. Much of this is attributable to the ‘permanent competition’ in the sector identified by Halffman and Radder (2015).

**Individual Performance Metrics**

Faculty are now seeing quantified, individual performance targets. These are relatively recent. They can apply to publications, ‘grant capture’ and even evaluation of teaching. Targets are a feature of the commercial world too, and always cause stress. Individual performance could be managed much more sympathetically and more supportively without hard targets, and through regular feedback. Hard targets mean in the last instance, noncompliant individuals can be sanctioned or retrenched. Research success is now defined as much by winning Nationally Competitive Grants and ‘soft-money’ consultancy contracts—as by publications. ARC or the medical NHMRC grants are hard to get with success rates below 15% for several disciplines (ARC Discovery: 17.8%, 2017 [ARC 2017a]; NHMRC project grants 2016: 15.2%). Those who win them can insulate themselves against higher teaching loads, which are often borne by early-career academics or those deemed not to be so research active. ‘Grant capture’ and publications in top-ranked journals with high impact factors, also sway hiring and promotion decisions—much more so than teaching excellence or public outreach (no matter that a grant is nothing more than an input—money to conduct research, not an output, and some researchers have little need of them).

Doing research cheaply is not rewarded at all (Martin 2011)! Neither is publishing ethically and cheaply—open access and outside the commercial publishers that are crippling university library budgets. Taking many years to produce a stellar edited volume, for
example, without top journal articles, is punished because this does not win the university sufficient points during national research excellence appraisals (ARC 2017b). In their worst forms, injunctions on input and output are close to being breaches of academic freedom, and they have worsened significantly over the last decade. Critics like Lorenz argue that ‘professions need professional autonomy in order to function properly and [that] quantified control makes this impossible’ (2015, 7).

Teaching is also subject to scrutiny and performance metrics—adding to stress. Oversight of quality is needed, but The Australian Quality Framework has standardised curricula. ‘Learning outcomes’ are now driving assessment. These are required in course profiles, which are contracts between academics and students for service delivery. Academics are assessed annually by centrally administered, mandatory student performance evaluations of both teaching and course experiences, as happens in many countries. Repeated failure to achieve teaching evaluation targets can have some effect on promotion and job prospects—even though international literature cautions that numerical values cannot be used to assess ‘quality’ (Stark 2013).

Internal support for research and conference attendance has dropped at the institutions we know. An automatic right to a research sabbatical is now rare. Academics are expected (or forced) to undertake a good deal of research work outside a 40 hour week—yet are exhorted to have a good work-life balance. Those encountering stress and depression are given little sympathy, typically told to telephone an outsourced counselling helpline and to access three free sessions of counselling per year.

All of this might be bearable if there was sympathy, opposition and protest by the university workforce. Constant struggle against inequity and pressure is materially and symbolically important, and a key feature of healthy workplaces. But many Australian academics, and professional staff, remain silent. Actual dissent is muted as people worry about the implications of protest. Hope lies with the ‘stars’—the full professors whose services are too good or too lucrative to lose. But even there, collective action is rare. Many professors are not accustomed to such struggles, and sadly they may share some of the values of the management—their success is, after all, because they achieved the required targets or because they were fortunate enough to have climbed the food chain before the structural reforms to tertiary education really began to bite.

Many senior academics reproduce exhortations to staff to publish in top journals, obtain grants, and boost departmental success. Yet there are plenty of examples of ‘top academics’ and executive-level managers being unable to achieve the same key performance indicators as the lowly staff they harass and cajole. In addition, if these were people on ‘normal salaries, who prioritise intellectual content and public interest over reputation’ (Halffman and Radder 2015, 176), then maybe there would be greater solidarity and siding with their overworked colleagues. This would solve many issues with one stroke since they would not support the worst forms of neoliberal management with such enthusiasm.
Conclusion

In sum, many of Halffman and Radder’s (2015) points ring true in Australia. But academics are not yet under desperate siege in our better-funded universities, even if restructuring and the quest for even higher rankings has been onerous. There are many clusters of decent, hardworking and convivial people that socialise together and even have time for some blue-sky thinking and research. Australia has many foreign academics that still find its universities much better, and more tolerant, than those in their own countries. But many others are hunkered down, trying to meet the next target or deadline, and it is our belief that this is more and more common as performance metrics and rankings have taken on greater importance. It is mid- to lower-salary professional staff, predominantly women, who have suffered the most - they lack the power to protest or resist.

As the British Athena-Swan gender equality accreditation system (SAGE 2017) reaches Australia, these and other issues are beginning to be scrutinised. Herculean efforts have kept teaching quality good enough to continue to attract students, but perhaps too many of them, and certainly with fees that are already high when cost of living is taken into account. In the mid-to-lower ranked institutions, academic life can be become almost unbearable. There is widespread burnout, high staff turnover, low morale, and some departmental closures and retrenchments. Again there are exceptions and clusters of goodwill we hear about, but the structural conditions of persistent underfunding can easily close them down.

We concur with most of Halffman and Radder’s (2015) Manifesto of twenty points to alleviate the pain of neoliberal university bureaucracy and its unethical outcomes. But Australian problems begin outside the university sector. With its vast resource-rich landmass and small population, Australia is strongly embedded in the neoliberal mind-set and there is little willingness to fully fund its public universities. Many students want degrees that will position them in a nation that is largely neoliberal and business-focussed. While we agree a university should be ‘aimed at the common good’ (175), the Australian version says that students (and maybe industry) should pay, not the state. Connell (2015) wants an end to Australian student fees and advocates a return to adequate support to universities from the public purse. Even if we could get ‘star’ professors to protest metrification, rankings and high fees, a prerequisite for change is a national government much more committed to the public university.

We return where we began—the problem is systemic, and financial. Running a university means managing a huge budget, paying hundreds or thousands of staff, and keeping the lights on. An ethical university, if we could somehow get back to that, will not come cheap, and this cannot be ignored (Bode and Dale 2012). Ending inter-faculty competition, and muting inter-university competition, is something that can be done by agreement (possible through centralised revenue distribution, with staff input into the models used, and de-emphasising rankings and metrics). Restoring academic autonomy is also essential: this will not be easy, because metrification begins at the top, where research funding and the remaining block grants also come from.
Apparently, F.J. Foakes Jackson once said to a new academic at Cambridge: ‘It’s no use trying to be clever—we are all clever here; just try to be kind—a little kind’ (the exact citation is hard to locate). Restoring cultures of conviviality, respect and cooperation can increase the power of collective resistance and resilience at a small scale. All students and staff would benefit. We need academics that can ‘take back’ the university, rather than grudgingly accepting the inequalities and the workloads—currently they are a minority.

A university should trust its staff and students. And, academics want more than a pat on the back for their achievements. If they could practice ‘slow’ scholarship (Berg and Seeber 2016; Mountz et al. 2015), meet practical and ethical responsibilities, and support academic and professional colleagues more, then we would feel more confident about the future of Australian university life. For this we need less bureaucratic oversight from people who are not qualified, experienced or able to foster work cultures of support and collegiality. Again, this is a sweeping statement because it conceals vast differences across the sector. But Australia needs less New Public Management, and more ‘confidence governance’, as Sweden has recognised (Myklebust 2017).

Most embarrassingly, Connell (2015, 24) points out that in Australia,

> [t]he universities are now full of fake accountability. At the same time, they have turned to public-relations techniques to attract potential students and donors and burnish the organization’s image. The corporate university now projects to the world a glossy fantasy of broad lawns, relaxed students, happy staff, spacious buildings, and eternal Australian sunshine. The cultural rationale of universities as bearers of truth, of rigorous thought, is becoming deeply compromised.

This phantasmagorical image conceals a troubling and sometimes unpleasant underside, as well as many decent people struggling hard to keep the Wolf from the door. And that really hurts.

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