

# Campus of dunces

Central control of university funding undermined freedom

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Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) showed higher education failing democracy and impoverishing students. Forty years later, on Australian campuses, it entails the craven pursuit of funding from authoritarian regimes and a medieval-style persecution of climate change heretics, like Peter Ridd. From the founding of the first universities in the twelfth century, education inculcated the heritage derived from the classical world. Australian universities now deny that heritage. What went wrong?

The collapse of academic integrity dates from the 'rationalisation' of universities and the performance models successive Labor and Liberal governments applied to the sector starting in the 1980s, when, as Bloom wrote, the university ceased to be an 'island of intellectual freedom'.

The borderless market in fee-paying students supercharged a new campus model preoccupied with branding, research metrics and progressive values. Australian student numbers tripled between 1987 and 2005 from 390,000 to 950,000 as higher education expanded dramatically across the Anglosphere. By 2009, the overseas student market was worth \$15.5 billion.

Structural transformation destroyed the university ushering in lower entrance requirements; plummeting academic standards; debased degrees and the rise of an academic bureaucracy dedicated to cutting rigorous subjects from physics to philosophy and, of course, Classics.

Expansion encouraged uniformity. Rather than treating students as young adults entering a world of free inquiry, academia infantilised them, offering prophylactics against heterodoxy and trigger warnings to ease potential discomfort. A climate of moral regulation estranged a millennial generation from freedom of thought and expression.

Expansion also fetishised grants, the matrix with which university committees assess suitability for promotion up a

steeply hierarchical career ladder. Nothing academics do as scholars and teachers wins as much commendation as external funding since the university extracts a 50 percent management fee. Hence, sources of funding must never be jeopardised. The most egregious effects of this practice involve overseas state-licensed bodies of an authoritarian disposition seeking academic validation for questionable regimes. Donations from the Middle East endow chairs in Islamic Studies that adopt an 'empathetic' approach to Islamic fundamentalism and Asiatic despotism. LSE involvement in the Gaddafi funding scandal (2011) was the most newsworthy example of a common practice and drew attention to the scale of Arab patronage of universities including Griffith, Melbourne and ANU.

Obsequious dependence on overseas funding particularly distorts the way universities depict authoritarian regimes across Asia. The role of Confucius Institutes advancing an uncritical view of the PRC, has only recently been questioned in the Australian media. As recent events at the University of Queensland demonstrate, patronage comes with strings. Staff or students are unlikely to write negatively of a regime that has paid for their salary, scholarships or the building they sit in. A consequence is 'research' that avoids controversial subjects like political reform, corruption, and democracy.

Simultaneously, scholars committed to fashionable theories promoting international justice, identity and human rights, and critical of the Western democratic nation state, dominate those receiving large grants dispensed by the European and the Australian Research Councils: 80 per cent of ARC grants given to International Relations research between 2002-18 went to proposals addressing an ethical understanding of world politics such as \$2.6 million for 'Deliberative Worlds, democracy, justice and a changing world'; \$553,000 to assess 'inclusive peace'; and \$500,000 to consider the uncertain, post-modern, Australian self.

The university's new mission coincided with the rise of an idealist, transnational agenda in the 1990s and reflects the close ties between progressive politics, academe and mainstream media. Funding bodies dispensing large grants to promote an ethically-fashionable agenda represent a disciplinary extension of the enlightened paternalistic bureaucracy that regulates the modern campus. This is hardly surprising. It was political philosophy departments devoted to social justice and cherishing diversity in the 1980s that fashioned the current concern with identity and minority recognition.

Progressive vice-chancelleries now determine who speaks and what can be said on campus. Diversity initiatives proliferate. Yet not all sorts of difference flourish. Universities have progressively eradicated conservative or sceptical voices. In 1999, the Carnegie Foundation found that 12 per cent of professors were conservatives, down from 27 per cent in 1969. By 2018, conservative representation in the social sciences and humanities had practically disappeared from the North American campus. Conservatives made up only 4 per cent of historians, 3 per cent of sociologists, and 2 per cent of literature professors. Conservative representation in these disciplines on Australian campuses would approach zero, reinforcing the entrenched bias towards appointments and funding that supports the prevailing orthodoxy.

Yet, not all academics suffered from the descending micro-managerial gloom. The new dispensation favoured academic entrepreneurs who identified with the prevailing paternalistic intimations of the progressive campus. Particularly successful in aligning fashionable values with the managerial model were those like Lord Giddens of LSE, Sir Steve Smith, former chair of the Russell group of leading UK universities, and their Australian epigones like Richard Higgott, former vice-chancellor of Murdoch University. Networks associated with this scholar bureaucracy dominate the senior echelons of university management in the UK and Australia.

In 1966, Friedrich Hayek warned against the penchant of Western governments for planning and the centralisation of research. The control of funds in the hands of a single authority proceeding according to a unitary plan, Hayek thought, would subvert the constitution of liberty. The postmodern campus abandoned liberty and instead celebrates a confederacy of dunces.

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