

**Rekindling the sociological imagination to understand the challenges facing
academics: Perspectives from an Australian business school**

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores current challenges facing business educators through the lens of C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination. To this end, academics within an Australian university business school were consulted to discuss their personal experiences in a context of rapid institutional change. The findings are significant for two reasons. First, by rekindling the sociological imagination, they present a richer understanding of the ways broader social forces shape personal experience. Second, they demonstrate the value of an expansive vista when determining the future of universities – a vista that considers socio-historical forces, organisational life, and classroom experiences.*

Keywords: Business education; business schools; graduate management education / training; management training / education / development

Over the past few decades, rapid change has occurred in many spheres of social life, consequent to broader forces beyond individual control (Knoedler, 2015; Pereira, 2015). Building on this theme, this paper examines the far reaching impact of neoliberal reform on business education through the eyes of a group of academics within an Australian university business school. The study rekindles C. Wright Mills' notion of sociological imagination as an analytic lens that reveals how personal experiences are connected with broader socio-historical forces (Wright Mills, 1959). As such, it reminds us that in the 21st century classroom experiences are often shaped by the imperatives of global capitalism and the free market economy.

Before presenting the study, an overview of the sociological imagination concept and the three-tier framework used in the study is provided. Following the presentation of the study, the paper concludes by summarising the key findings as well as highlighting the associated implications for practitioners and researchers.

THREE-TIER FRAMEWORK

Business education represents a multilayered and complex phenomenon, influenced by myriad interconnected factors and forces at different levels of social reality. For this reason, Wright Mills' (1959) seminal notion of the sociological imagination represents an ideal lens through which to examine business education in the 21st century. The sociological imagination 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (p. 6). Although proposed

over half a century ago, this concept remains relevant to ‘think with’, as it encourages us to unveil hidden phenomena that affect our daily routines. As Wright Mills (1959, p. 7) once wrote, ‘the sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of ... self-consciousness’, as it catalyses thought-provoking reflective questions like, what is the nature of the society in which we live; how is a phenomenon shaped by the past, the present, and the future; what are the defining features of these periods – their norms, institutions, and discourses; how are these features connected; how have they changed over time and why; and what kinds of ‘human nature’ emerge when we consider our society at this point in time? These questions can be better addressed if we consider three interrelated spheres of social activity described here as the macro, the meso, and the micro contexts (see Figure 1). The macro context provides the broad contours of the current socio-historical era, which is largely shaped by the demands of the free-market economy; the meso-context depicts the institutional system that is influenced by macro-systemic forces, while the micro dimension encompasses specific domains of social life that generate our identities and inter-subjectivities, like the workplace, the classroom, and the home. The macro dimension is used in this paper as a conceptual tool to characterise the overarching context of the research – namely, the forces of the free-market economy under conditions of increased globalisation, while the meso and micro dimensions are used to make sense of the participants’ views on business education and their personal experiences within these environments. Despite considerable overlap between the three contexts, they are described separately in this paper for greater clarity.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

Macro Context

For the purpose of the current research, the macro context is viewed as shaped by transformations that have occurred over the last few decades within many nations, particularly those represented in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These transformations have been unleashed by the spread of the free-market economy, fuelled by neoliberal principles such as deregulation, competition, and privatisation (Shore, 2010; van der Wende, 2007). Neoliberalism is understood to be an assemblage of ideas, policies, and practices underpinned by two premises – first, that resources are to be allocated through the free market; and second, that state

intervention and regulation are to be nominal (Harvey, 2005; Saunders, 2010; Turner, 2008).

Accordingly, a series of reforms influenced by the ideas of Thatcher and Reagan were introduced in the 1980s (Cooper, 2014), all of which significantly affected OECD nations, and the social practices and discourses therein.

The research presented in this paper is particularly concerned with the influence of free-market policies on business education within universities – notably, the policies that espouse deregulation, reduced government intervention, increased competition, and the growing privatisation of services traditionally delivered by the state. These phenomena are core features of the macro context.

Meso Context

In this paper, the meso context is represented by the ‘corporate university’ – an organisational form created by neoliberalism, which behaves like a private enterprise (Blass, 2005; Faber, 2003; Giroux, 2009; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Miscamble, 2006). Universities in many OECD nations compete for government funding, using managerial techniques to ensure economic efficiency and productivity. They have commodified education and turned students into consumers (Furedi, 2011). Within this context, educational practices are shaped by ‘economic pragmatism and commercial mimicry’ (Karpov, 2013, p. 23).

In Australia, the genesis of market-based reforms in higher education spans three critical moments – namely, the Dawkins (1988) reforms; the Vanstone (1996) reforms; and the Bradley (2008) reforms. The Dawkins reforms altered governance arrangements, making Australian universities competitive. Vanstone furthered this agenda by goading universities to become internationally-competitive, consumer-driven enterprises (Raciti, 2010; Smart, 1997). The Bradley reforms aimed to develop ‘a diverse, globally focused and competitive higher education sector’ (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 205), following concerns that Australian universities were lagging behind their international counterparts. Towards this aim, Australian universities were given the ‘*freedom to enrol as many students as they wish*’ (p. xiii, emphasis added), and were apparently unchained from government control as they vied for student enrolments.

In the wake of these three critical moments, Australian universities have witnessed ‘declining government resources, increasing student numbers, increased reporting requirements, and external audits’ (Szekeres, 2006, p. 133). To manage these changes, universities deploy corporate strategies such as course rationalisation, marketing courses abroad, reduction in professional development, online courses, and (relatedly) staff redundancies (Vidovich & Currie, 2014; Zhang, Xia, Fan, & Zhu, 2015). More recently, a number of Australian universities have turned their attention to the non-English-speaking market to generate additional revenue, with some unintended consequences (Besser & Cronau, 2015) discussed later.

For business schools in particular, the ‘changing wind of managerialism’ (Lightbody, 2010, p. 4) has spurred an increasing preoccupation with accreditation through the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Accreditation with this association is claimed to represent ‘the highest standard of achievement for business schools worldwide... [symbolising a school’s capacity to] produce graduates that are highly skilled and more desirable to employers than other non-accredited schools’ (2014, para. 2). Despite divergent opinion on the value of accreditation for business schools, it does appear to pose new challenges for academics, creating protracted periods of surveillance to audit and ultimately standardise teaching practices to meet market demands (Cordier & Stablein, 2013; Miles, McClure Franklin, Grimmer, & Heriot, 2015; Sciglimpaglia, Medlin, Toole, & Whittenburg, 2007; Zammuto, 2008).

Micro Context

The micro context refers to the personal and relational aspects of social life, many of which are shaped by what happens at meso and macro levels. It encompasses behaviour, thought, and emotion (Archer, 2000, pp. 194-195). The study highlights what Archer terms the ‘practical order of emotion’, which refers to emotion arising from practical activities such as paid work. Over the past few years, the performative work of the academic has become ‘more highly structured, technological and deadlined’ (Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009, p. 42) which has psychological implications for the people who perform it. With reduced funding to support research and professional development, academics spend greater time on administrative tasks that were once the remit of their non-academic – or ‘professional’ (Sebalj, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2012) – colleagues. Research suggests that these

changes have contributed to: the demise of academic morale; increased occupational stress; poorer wellbeing; and intentions to prematurely leave the profession (Bexley, James, & Arkoudis, 2011; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Winefield, Boyd, Saebel, & Pignata, 2008).

Two key points emerge from this overview of the macro, meso, and micro contexts. First, the experiences and emotions shared by Australian academics in present times connect them with each other and with their meso and macro contexts. Second, the sociological imagination can help to better understand the dynamic interplay between these three contexts, which are shaped, and also shape each other. To explore this further, the study and its findings are presented below.

METHODS

Following clearance from the relevant ethics committee, 12 academics from an Australian business school were interviewed to explore their current professional challenges and the factors that contribute to these. For confidentiality, the identity of the university is withheld – although, suffice to say, it represents a ‘young’ institution by international standards (Times Higher Education, 2015). The interviews were held between June and September, 2014 (inclusive) and were conducted either in person ($n=10$) or via email (due to limited availability). Participants were purposively sampled to include representation from different academic levels, as well as different disciplines (see Table 1). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, only pseudonyms are used in this paper.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Interviews were deemed appropriate for three reasons. First, exploratory studies as this are conducive to the use of qualitative research methods (Maxwell, 2013). Second, the research focuses on personal experiences illustrated by personal accounts, as they offer ‘interesting clues [to]... understand... social reality and ideas, beliefs, values and other aspects of ‘subjectivities’’ (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1146). Third, the ‘reflective brainwork’ (Stake, 2005, p. 449) required to analyse and interpret qualitative data can facilitate sense-making by revealing connections between seemingly disparate elements (Smith, 2002). It must be emphasised nevertheless that the findings of this study are not generalisable, pertaining specifically to the context under investigation.

The interview transcriptions and emails were coded and analysed manually through deductive and inductive logic. More specifically, while the macro, meso, and micro contexts that epitomise the sociological imagination were used as a deductive framework to anchor the inquiry, the researchers were also open to themes that emerged inductively from the analysis – they ‘combined and ordered’ ‘Bits and pieces of information from interviews... into larger themes... work[ing]... from the particular to the general’ (Merriam, 2014, pp. 15-16).

FINDINGS

Macro Context

Only one interviewee explicitly acknowledged the influence of broader socio-historical and economic forces on higher education and the personal life of academics. In Joe’s view, it is the ‘neoliberal agenda’ that has given rise to the corporate university and the currently observed commodification of business education. In his own words:

Business education seem[s] to be facing...the neoliberal agenda of reducing costs, increased revenue, standardising and making a commodity out of business education... If you read more closely, it’s really phrased as a ‘better return on capital’ or a ‘better return for the capital employed’. So there’s this agenda that university education has to give a return on capital and I think that’s pretty significant in the way it’s starting to impact on business education.

Joe’s comments suitably set the scene for the narratives of the ‘corporate university’ and associated phenomena at meso- and micro levels, which, as will be seen below, was the focus of discussion in the interviews.

Meso Context

Participants were well aware of the challenges posed by the corporate university at institutional level – in particular the increased commodification of tertiary education manifested in

institutional pressures to demonstrate ‘value for money’. For example, referring specifically to business education, Mitch commented:

Business education has become a business, and is quite commercially-driven. I suppose the environment has also become much more competitive... in terms of fighting for funding. So there is probably a conflict in universities between wanting to be a more successful in business and wanting to be more successful in business education.

Highlighting the changing nature of business schools, Charlie acknowledged that their role had been once to ‘provide the managers of the future’, but now they form part of ‘newer mass universities [that] have taken a hyper-TAFE model’. As universities respond to different markets and different masters, noted Robert, business schools are compelled to ensure their students are ‘work ready’ with ‘useful skills... they can immediately earn money from’. Therefore, universities are forced into an old-fashioned transmission model (Butin, 2014) that merely delivers content for student consumption, undermining the aim of fostering critical thinking among students. This theme was evident in the responses of Shaun and Robert:

The economic model is that the business educator should just be the deliverer of someone else’s material and thoughts, which takes away the critique. That was why business educators were initially valued; they taught critique to students. They didn’t teach just content.

(Shaun)

You leave wider perspectives, general knowledge acquisition, thinking skills acquisition as something that they do as a hobby after work because that’s not something that the taxpayer should be subsidising. (Robert)

The standardisation of academic units and the bureaucratic protocols associated with this process were recurring themes in the interviews. Standardisation was deemed to be problematic,

according to Charlie, because units were ‘dumbed down’ to meet the learning needs of the ‘the lowest denominator within the class’. He further stated:

I tend to see... a lot of spoon feeding, a lot of trivialisation. We try to make things, everything, as simple as possible... But in the process, what probably happens is a bit of compromising. This is university level, not TAFE level.

Standardisation was also said to hinder pedagogical creativity. For example, Robert highlighted the dwindling opportunities for innovative or unconventional academic units and business schools, arising from institutional ‘isomorphism’:

Everybody is scared stiff of being ‘the odd man or woman out’, or being ‘the odd school out’. But we know from our familiarity with business teaching... that being ‘the odd man out’ successfully is entirely what success is all about. Isomorphism does not work – not in business and I don’t know how we get that changed... because isomorphism is so powerful because it’s safe.

Micro Context

As mentioned earlier, pressures to increase students’ numbers, introduced by the Bradley reforms of 2008, have inevitably led to larger classes which significant consequences for educators. For example, Jessica reported difficulties in providing individualised attention to students in large tutorial classes:

It’s been a little bit like the “boiled frog syndrome”, where it actually started off with 25 students in a tute... You could pretty well engage one on one... Then in the last two years, it’s actually gone to... 30 and even sometimes 40... It’s extraordinarily difficult to try and run meaningful classes.

Amanda felt strongly about what she perceives as a tendency to ‘mass-produce’ graduates, arising from increased enrolments:

We've become... just like a sausage factory; a cheap sausage factory.

I mean 27 graduation ceremonies three times a year! What is that telling you?

For some participants the problem was more specifically the increase in enrolments of students from non-English-speaking background as a strategy to increase revenue. As noted by Mitch:

Quite often we go and recruit overseas students into various programs and the emphasis is so much on making sure that we meet our budgets and targets and revenue expectations... But when you are in the classroom and you have a mix of domestic and international students, you're essentially teaching two different classes in the same room... you are actually... lowering the standards and the students who are capable of something better are going to feel that... If you try to raise the standard to somewhere above average, then you find that maybe some of the international students will be lagging behind.

In the same vein, Christina believed that the poor command of the English language of some international students undermined the quality learning:

I have noticed the difference between my... international students and [my]... local students. The difference in the quality of the work and the level of interest in the course was very significant... I went to a meeting and heard an executive say, 'We're so excited because we're getting thousands more international students in the MBA program'. There was no recognition that that means... extra work.

A reported increase in academic misconduct cases as a result of larger numbers of international students was also reported. Jessica commented, for example, that some students with limited English skills were said to resort to plagiarism or collusion to pass assessments and avert the need to re-enrol in (and pay for) the unit:

The other challenge with the international students is to make sure that most of the work they're doing is their own. That's another issue. We need to design the assessments very carefully... so it's not easily replicated by somebody elsewhere. But you're still not too sure.

New requirements arising from institutional reforms were said to have significantly changed what academics did, how they did it, and how often they did it. For example, some participants noted that the introduction of 'online courses and technologies' – as a cost saving strategy – warranted greater involvement of professional staff members who monitored online activities. In Joe's opinion, these requirements undermined academic competencies and reduced academic autonomy:

I have personally been using blended learning for years, and I wanted to use blended learning for my... unit. But I was told that the 'experts' [said with sarcasm] of blended learning were going to need to meet and talk to the [academic line manager] about what they were going to do. Now, that's never happened to me in ten years; I've been held up while other people make the decisions.

DISCUSSION

Examined through the lens of the sociological imagination, the data reveals that the macro context of the analysis (i.e., global capitalism under conditions of free-market economy) remained under-explored in the interviews. Although investigating the reasons for this finding is beyond the scope of this paper, it can be speculated that this was perhaps due to the possibility that the macro context was taken for granted by participants as the backdrop for their more concrete and immediate concerns present at meso and micro levels. Indeed, participants demonstrated a good grasp of issues pertaining to the meso and micro contexts, and awareness of the links between these two domains. Their responses focused on the corporatisation of the university system and associated phenomena including the commodification of education; growing number of domestic and international enrolments; the introduction of managerial practices leading to greater standardisation and bureaucratisation of work processes; and the introduction of cost-cutting measures that affecting

quality of course delivery. Meso context phenomena, in turn, were seen to have more tangible implications for participants at micro level, including: the effects of increased workloads resulting from larger classes, growing bureaucratisation of work processes, lower levels of literacy among international students; loss of autonomy due to the greater levels of surveillance; and diminished creativity due to standardisation of teaching practices. These phenomena have affective implications for academics reflecting the ‘practical order of emotion’ (Archer 2000). For example, the responses of participants such as Jessica, Amanda, Charlie, Joe and Robert conveyed a sense of indignation and powerlessness with what they perceived as unreasonable work-related practices and processes. The sociological imagination therefore reveals that broader socio-economic forces impact upon on the very identity of academics, as individuals try to grapple with loss of creativity stemming from greater levels of standardisation of work processes, and loss of autonomy stemming from increased surveillance and accountability requirements. These findings confirm that the experience of business educators in the 21st century (and arguably that of their counterparts in other disciplines) is not clear-cut and unproblematic, but a multilayered and complex phenomenon shaped by interconnected forces that operate at different levels of social reality.

It is important to emphasise nevertheless that there is no claim in this paper that the participants are representative of academics within or beyond the discipline of business, or Australia. This is particularly because research suggests that younger universities – like that represented in this study – are ‘greatly influenced by contemporary government policy agenda’ relative to their traditional counterparts that ‘trade largely on their established strong reputation’ ([Schofield, Cotton, Gresty, Kneale, & Winter, 2013, p. 193](#)). There is thus scope for a more comprehensive study using the three-tiered framework presented here involving comparisons between disciplines, or even between academics in Australian universities and abroad. Further research could also investigate whether there are significant differences in the opinions of academics with regard to the current challenges they face, on the basis of gender, seniority and culture.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the exploratory nature of the research presented here, this paper can be said to make three contributions: first and foremost it rekindles the old concept of the sociological

imagination to demonstrate how macro-systemic forces well beyond the control of individuals shape what happens in their personal life – more specifically how free-market policies influence how business educators think and behave within an Australian university in contemporary times. The analysis reveals that there is no linear or causal relationship between the three contexts analysed, but rather, a complex and dynamic interplay between them. Second, by touching upon Archer's notion 'practical order of emotion', this paper paves the way for further qualitative research focusing more specifically on the link between institutional reform and emotion – emotion stemming from the ever growing pressures on academics to be accountable, efficient and productive in order to meet the demands of the corporate university. Third, by raising issues such as the effects of heavy workloads, standardisation and surveillance, and feelings of dissatisfaction among academics, this paper can serve as a basis for reflection by policy makers on what can be done to counteract the effects of phenomena taking place at macro and meso levels in order to humanise the corporate university.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Research Participants (*n*=12)

Attribute	N°
Gender	
Male	6
Female	6
Academic Level	
Associate Lecturer	2
Lecturer	4
Senior Lecturer	2
Associate Professor	1
Professor	2
Employment	
Full Time	11
Casual	1
Discipline	
Accounting	1
Hospitality, Marketing and Sport	3
Human Resources and Management	8

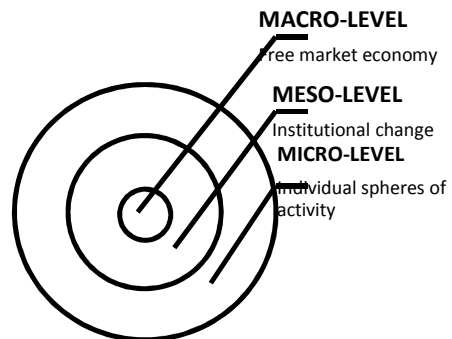


Figure 1: Three-Tiered Framework