

Speech by Verity Burgmann, School of Political Science, University of Melbourne at the NTEU Rally held on 21 May at the State Library of Victoria.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet.

I have been an academic for over three decades. I used to like my job but not the last few years. There's been a generally downward deterioration in our working conditions over these decades, at every level of the academic hierarchy. And it has now reached crisis point. About a dozen colleagues in my Faculty have helped me prepare some comparisons over time by providing me yesterday with statements about what is going on now, concerns shared by everyone I speak to on campus.

It is a particularly difficult time at Melbourne but the Melbourne Model is not the cause of the problem but one of the many effects of the underlying problem. The way we are being treated at the University of Melbourne in the past few years has made us suspect that the Melbourne Model is less about an alternative pedagogy than it pretends and more about cost-cutting than it admits. The fact that colleagues on other campuses are also suffering unbearable pressures and facing huge redundancies confirms these suspicions.

I started academic life in the late 1970s, like many academics, as a sessional tutor. The pay seemed good, the expectations of my duties were reasonable and the facilities decent.

Compare this with a statement yesterday by a sessional tutor.

'There are currently 2 small offices (with one computer and roughly 5 desks in each) for 40 tutors in [my School]! This is not only ridiculously inadequate in terms of physical space but also speaks volumes about university attitudes toward tutors - clearly signalling the way in which they are neither valued nor treated as professionals... Such poor practices ... have a negative impact on the service tutors are able to give to students.... Growing class sizes mean that ... consultations with tutors constitute the only personal engagement with academic staff that the majority of students experience during their degrees. Expecting students to discuss problems ... in a public room, with other tutors and students constantly coming and going, is to treat them with utter contempt...

Tutors, casual lecturers (also increasingly relied on by universities) and research staff (without whom much university research would grind to a halt) are given absolutely no job security - however brilliant a tutor, lecturer or researcher, securing work in the following semester (or at the end of a short-term research contract) is entirely down to luck and establishing good relationships with more senior academics (who may, or may not be awarded the research grants which would allow them to hire research staff)... Such pressures drive casual academics away from universities and into other sectors which actually treat them as valued professionals.

Universities have got their priorities so wrong ... Blaming all of their problems on shortages in federal funding ... or the 'global economic crisis' is a cop-out - if they can afford massive infrastructure investments, huge publicity campaigns and to hire external consultants to advise them at every step in their evolution Demonstrating that staff

are not important, at the same time as increasing class sizes, cutting subjects and thus sending a clear message to students that they are not important either, it would seem that universities fail to value education at all.'

Much of the 1980s I was a full-time tutor in three different departments, a position that now barely exists, because that work is done by sessionals at exploitative rates. I conducted 8 tutorials per week and numbers in each tutorial were capped at 12. Now it is 20 in my School, up to 35 in other places I have heard. And I was paid a proper full-time rate, so I was there in an office of my own most of the week, looking after the students, giving them one to one assistance, benefiting both students and lecturers at the same time.

By 1988 I became a lecturer, contract at first, but converted within a couple of years to a continuing position under terms negotiated and won by our union.

Nowadays things are moving in the opposite direction. A colleague told me:

'I know of at least 7 people who have been forced from fixed-term to casual employment in the last five months.'

Things did get a bit more stressful during the early 1990s with increased student numbers, but I never felt undervalued or outrageously put upon. There was a collegiality about the way we coped with the transition to mass higher education.

I was encouraged and enabled to pursue my research interests and publications. I wasn't ordered to produce an expected number of DEST points per year, while being denied the time to achieve this expectation without becoming ill with stress and forgetting what my children looked like.

I was actively encouraged to apply for promotion to Levels C and D, not discouraged or only reluctantly supported out of budgetary considerations like so often these days.

In 2003 I became a professor. I would have thought this would make academic life better, make it easier to pursue research and teach courses rewarding to students and myself.

But in the last few years, in terms of teaching satisfaction and time for research, I would rather be a base-grade lecturer of the 1980s and early 1990s than a professor nowadays.

The last two and a half years have without doubt been the most miserable and stressed of my entire working life over three decades.

My colleagues have similar reactions.

An administrator in another School had this to say:

'Professional staff have massively increased workloads—no replacement of vacant positions—or replacement at a lower level which in turn limits the chances of promotion

as position levels are decreased. Currently there is no linked advancement or reclassification of levels as these matters would not be approved by our faculty.'

My department has been savaged. I am deliberately calling it a department because university management informed us we must not use that word any more after departments were merged into Schools a few years ago.

So to go back to my department. In 1995 we had 25 staff. Now we have 16. Most of those losses have been in the past two years. And we are teaching even larger numbers of students than when we had better numbers of staff. Other departments are worse hit.

So how are we teaching all these students? Probably badly.

We are certainly not teaching them as well as we used to be able to.

I have always quite enjoyed lecturing. But I do not enjoy lecturing to up to 900 students a week, over many lecture hours, without the time to prepare properly.

Why can't I prepare properly?

Firstly, because I have lost so many colleagues, like everyone else remaining, I have:

- 1.increased numbers of honours and postgraduate students to supervise;
- 2.increased numbers of students enrolled in undergraduate courses, so there is inevitably increased traffic of student enquiries and requests;
- 3.more administrative functions for academic staff because there are fewer academic staff to share these tasks amongst, and the tasks themselves have become more onerous and time consuming, because of staff cuts elsewhere.

A colleague who, amongst several other onerous responsibilities, is the library officer in another department, coping with repeated requests from overworked library staff for more academic input into how to cut costs, what to order, what not to order, said this:

'With the university cutting back on library staff (eg specialist subject librarians) and also cutting back on funding for books and journals, it puts extra pressure on remaining under-resourced library staff which then also puts extra pressure on academic staff (such as us) who are being asked to do time-onerous tasks that require specific library expertise and skills. Academic staff are then being asked to make decisions about what to cut in terms of library resources, based on relatively little information and in tight time frames. So, in a university which is seeking to position itself as a world leader in research and teaching, we are cutting back on library staff and library resources (eg books and journals) that are central to the achievement of that objective.'

But the university has recently spent \$400 m. on real estate in Carlton and Parkville.

The second set of reasons why I can't teach and research as well as I used to is because of the extra, often absurd tasks, we have been given.

1. There is much more marketing and public relations work, such as Welcome Days, Academic Advice Days, Open Days. These seem to grow like Topsy;
2. There are increasingly complicated reporting requirements and increasing numbers of forms to fill out just to get stuff you used to be given and trusted to use wisely. For example, in my School, we used to have about \$500 each year for research activity costs. For several years, we lost this completely. It is about to be reinstated, but we now have to fill out a form with details about how we will spend this piddling amount of money;
3. Even the benefits of the new technology are being used to exploit us further.

A colleague mentioned the case of the increasing focus on teaching delivery through our web-based Learning Management System.

'While this is helpful in some regards, it also has an impact on everyday workloads and on educational practice, in terms of the extra time required for managing LMS. To give one specific example, this year, we have been required to put our subject guides into a very specific and uniform standardised format involving a great deal of on-line work around reorganising our reading guides to fit the required format, in addition to the usual work that goes into developing a subject guide. So, this takes away the capacity for individuality among lecturers in terms of subject design and presentation, where we have to comply with one standardised format, and without being given any evidence that a standardised format is beneficial in any way, or is preferred by students. So, extra work, without evidence as to its benefit.'

Then there's a third set of reasons why my current book is way overdue to the publisher.

An article in the *Fin. Review* recently emphasized that what motivates staff engagement is 'messages [from management] that inspire trust, communicate compassion, infer stability and give some hope'.

And the opposite is also true. We don't feel valued and respected and trusted.

One colleague stated: *'The new metrics-based PDF system facilitates a bullying culture in which some staff feel pursued and haunted to the breakdown of their health. There needs to be encouragement rather than an undifferentiated yardstick.'*

Another said: *'We need to dispense with the alienating management practices that have dominated the University recently.'*

A colleague in another department who nearly lost their job had this to say.

'Of all the unpleasant consequences of being threatened with involuntary redundancy, this one stands out for me: the loss of respect for the administration. Working beyond the norm in service to the Melbourne Model ... and faced with an arbitrary redundancy criterion which was indifferent to the required breadth of my contributions, I had no choice but to revise my opinion of how the University of Melbourne is managed. Hard decisions are understandable. But the Arts panic of 2007 and 2008 seemed to usher in a Tayloresque approach to the management of budgets and staff throughout the university that reflects an administration blind to the adversities it has wrought. The current failure to negotiate the EB is simply another such reflection.'

A couple of years ago I helped persuade a young academic to leave a university interstate and accept a Level C position at Melbourne while turning down an equivalent offer elsewhere. I asked him how he now felt about how Melbourne compared with his previous university. Apart from the obvious comments about cuts to academic staff numbers with consequent loss of morale and shifting of teaching and admin. responsibilities to those who remain, he specifically mentioned:

'The imposition of a new appraisal process without consultation, that attempts to define performance according to strict quantitative criteria and emphasises immediate productivity over development of long-term research projects; the authoritarian culture, in which the flow of information is restricted and critics sidelined; the accounting culture, in which unreliable projections of budget surpluses or deficits function as the primary measures of educational success or failure; and the withdrawal of resources from the classroom to finance often ill-conceived pet projects of university managers.'

And it is so counterproductive. For example, a Department in my Faculty, within the top five in a regular survey of English-speaking equivalent departments, has fallen outside of this benchmark for the first time. This has been attributed to the cost-cutting mergers of departments into Schools and loss of staff.

Will management ever learn that its most valuable resources are human resources and that it treats these resources disrespectfully only at its peril?

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