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EDITORIAL

Universities and Scholarship under Assault: A challenging era for research (and review!)

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In a lengthy apology for refusing to review an article, a long-time colleague recently wrote to me lamenting the increasing pressures of work for social science academics. She wrote:

> *We academics of a certain age have seen massive changes in our working lives at universities. And the worst change is that everyone wants something of us – admin, professional involvement, finding famous graduates to highlight impact, filling in yet another survey . . . We are just never given time or space, much less respect or appreciation for our research or teaching; there's no time to develop good ideas or go down a blind alley . . . And now *they* are asking for voluntary redundancies in our Department – apparently we don't work hard enough, and with fewer people to share the load, it will be even worse (if I last) . . . .*

Well, that is an excerpt. The letter was two closely typed pages, replete with memories of long-ago academia where departmental secretaries did most of the admin and all the typing, of tutorials comprising five or ten students, of long lunches and debating controversies and planning idealist projects. The letter ended with a long sad list of the opportunities for scholarship that academics and teachers have lost in the last few decades. Indeed, in the time taken to write the letter, my long-time colleague could very well have reviewed the dashed article that needed her expertise.

But she was right. These are 'interesting times' in the most foreboding sense. Everywhere, education is at the forefront of culture wars and power wars. It seems lobbyists and leaders across the world are seeking to remould, remove, or reduce access to research or education, (especially higher education, for it is axiomatic that education increases the capacity of the citizenry to critique or dissent). That is precisely why conservative governments seek to prevent or remove opposition and its causes.

None of this is new (Newfield 2021; Veblen and Teichgraeber 2015: Skúlason 2015; Forsyth 2014). Education has long been a core instrument for those who hold power, regardless of whether it was ruling classes withholding education from the masses or deeming certain sections of society unfit to receive any but the most basic learning. If not withheld, the content of, or approaches to, learning may be modified or reshaped to reinforce the political status quo, to rewrite history, or to marginalise certain perspectives. This has been very evident in higher education institutions which enable and generate questioning and investigating and doubting (Connell 2019; Di Leo 2024; Fleming 2021; Giroux 2020; Roper 2018).

Furthermore, the massification of higher education in late twentieth century not only led to increased enrolments at universities but has also been intertwined by ever-greater commodification of all kinds of scholarship. In English-speaking countries in particular, universities have become businesses rather than institutions of research, teaching, and learning. Students are seen as 'clients' and burgeoning towns as 'new markets', essential for any good profit-oriented organisation. Moreover, universities have been the focus of culture wars where mass media oversimplify or portray critique and dissenting ideas as deviant, or dangerous. In Argentina in 2024, academics held deep fears that the government would close down universities to avoid production and dissemination of the wrong ideas. Elsewhere universities have been bomb targets or forced to move to another country or deprived of all funding. Some local and state governments now claim the right to decide what can and cannot be taught, based on political expediency or religious laws, rather than scholarly imperatives. Here in Australia, making academics and support staff redundant has lately seemed a predominant activity of very highly paid Vice-Chancellors (Presidents), many with little experience or understanding of scholarship or higher education. Also in Australia, as elsewhere, universities have shifted their focus towards more vocational training for students and supporting only research activities which are profitable, rather than scholarly; so research, learning and teaching which uphold critical thinking and knowledge getting are deemed less 'useful' (Forsyth 2023; Shear et al 2015; Sims 2020).

Further, universities have received less and less funding from home governments, leading to the primacy of markets as drivers for initiatives. Again, none of this is new. As shown above, there has been a fairly relentless disvaluing of much scholarship in recent decades, as universities have shifted to sites of profit and business expansion. Across the world, scholarship and the questioning of shibboleths have been loudly disparaged by corporate profiteers and extractive or defence industries at all levels of business and government.

Latterly, a surge of anti-intellectual, anti-egalitarian political movements have further entrenched these kinds of shifts in all continents and countries. Everywhere, politicians, entrepreneurs, and business owners have sought to diminish the traditional idea of universities as sources of research, ideas, and knowledge, much less ethics, moral values, or intellectual advancement. Rather, the entrenchment of business values, of rankings and competition, and measurements on the one hand, and the ever-dominant view that university workers should do more and more with less funding, fewer colleagues, and greater constraints, has become almost an article of belief, virtually unquestioned.

And, not surprisingly, social sciences and humanities are probably the most under challenge; within these fields, known areas of dissent and critique have been further marginalised. The commonsense widely held public views have been drawn along major cultural shifts – from old ideas of university learning and research as idealist and elite education to mass education with vocational emphases, and from production of scholarship for a better, wiser society to pressures for research for commercial gains or warfare production.

In Australia, this is what populist politicians call 'the pub test', where for example the question asked is 'Would a fellow (always of the male species) in a pub accept (for example) that unemployed workers deserve more support?'. Goaded by media, the fellow would answer strongly negative. Often social science and humanities research is framed as wasteful, making too little financial justification for its continuance – and causing trouble into the bargain. The new leaders of university make decisions based on 'hard-nosed' business grounds. The old idealist principles of academic rigour, ethics, knowledge-making, teaching and research for improving citizens' lives, or seeking fairness and the good society. These are no longer seen as apt grounds for making good decisions in higher education.

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But how does slightly bitter commentary relate to my erstwhile colleague and her incapacity to write even one short review as an act of collegiality? It is because it has been the academics (and the supporting staff) of universities who are the sacrificial lambs of twenty-first century higher education. University administrative and broad teaching software systems are increasingly designed for the convenience of senior managers and administration, not the academics who do the grunt work. To make universities 'more accountable', more like good capitalist enterprises, has required business measures of quality control, calculating inputs and outcomes, and assessing them according to ever more criteria. That's what good businesses do, right? Yet, of course one of the consequences of the rise of measurements and growing scarcity of resources in universities is individualisation, and its concomitant, competition amongst academics replaces collegiality or cooperation. So academics are despairing and often exhausted.

Moreover, it is very difficult to measure social or intellectual progress or ethics or rigour or moral capabilities. But, like all good business ventures, proxies have naturally been found in these corporate edu-systems. They might include student popularity, or the size of classes, the magnitude of (profit-making) research grants, or the most publications in the highest ranked journals, and so on. They can not exactly or appropriately measure scholarly excellence, but they are seen by managers and executives as feasible proxies – and have multiplied. Indeed, the measure often becomes the objective.

Thus, in an environment of shrinking permanent staff numbers, increasing profit motives and so on, academic colleagues have found themselves with less and less time to think, evaluate, research, or ponder. And the research output is arguably less in substance than it could have been, since the system now encourages fast food scholarship and publication of small neat papers in ranked journals, much of which add little if anything to human knowledge (Quinlan 2019). Instead, more and more hours are taken up each day with new protocols, forms, and measures for teaching and research and professional engagement and governance/ management and so on. All must be measured, boxes must be ticked and recorded correctly. And that was why my long-time colleague had reminisced sadly about long-gone days, and the current multiple and barely sustainable demands. It is almost intolerable – and may remain so or even deteriorate further. The neoliberal corporate university is a powerful and self-sustaining force (Catanzaro 2020; Connell and Hil 2022; Mitchell and Woolston 2024).

On the other hand, the editor in me still wishes that every academic could just take a few breaks from endless form-filling and (virtual) paper-shuffling each year, and just review a couple of articles. . . . .Oh that we had a metric for that!!! Actually no – enough of metrics and proxies.

Indeed enough of the commentary – the articles in this issue – is much more exciting and provocative.

In this Issue

As ever this issue comprises a global journey across all continents. It begins with a phalanx of top-notch articles from Australia. In **Non-Compete Clauses in Employment Contracts: The Case for Regulatory Response**, one of Australia's most respected and long-standing jurists, Dr **Iain Ross,** explores the immense growth in recent years of *non-competes*, that is 'contractual terms which provide that once the employment ends the employee cannot work for another employer' in the same industry, field or specified geographic area for a certain time. Previously limited to senior executives, in many developed countries, Ross shows that 20% of Australian workers are now subject to non-competes. He explores the problem outcomes for individuals, the labour market, and the economy and concludes

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with several insightful recommendations for a regulatory response which will minimise negative impacts.

Also with a regulatory focus, **Schofield-Georgeson** compares the role of State (NSW) and Federal jurisdictions in labour enforcement in **When the States led wage enforcement: Can the Commonwealth match them?**. In an intricate and lively historical investigation, Schofield-Georgeson investigates the enforcement legislation and regulation in NSW and then offers an incisive comparative analysis with equivalent Commonwealth processes in the last two decades. In so doing, Schofield-Georgeson highlights the centrality of the institutions in enforcement in Australia's industrial relations history, notably demonstrating how they also played a major role in reducing inequalities, especially in the mid-20th century.

Once again, an historical perspective is fundamental to the research and insights offered by **Rawling and Quinlan** in their lengthy and highly readable sweeping analysis, **Regulating precarious work: A paradigm shift**. Indeed, they argue that 'placing the new legislation into historical context enhances our understanding of the law and surrounding policy debates'. Rawling and Quinlan draw on some important parallels between the extant challenges and environment for early Australian industrial relations legislation and institutions, on the one hand, and recent regulatory initiatives on the other. They show how the significant Albanese Federal Labor government initiatives, including the package of industrial relations laws introduced between 2022 and 2024, marked a paradigm shift from previous policies, most notably the deregulation and predominance of business interests in driving major changes to working conditions and workers' rights.

Recognising the immense and urgent challenges of addressing climate change, **Rainnie, Snell, and Dean** offer some extremely important evidence and analysis of the possibilities and issues facing the growth of the green economy in their succinct and provocative article **In Working Futures in Australia's Renewable Industries?**. The authors explore the potential for jobs and work in the emerging 'climate capitalism' in Australia, especially the needs and potential for work and employment in Australia's renewable energy industry sectors, so-called 'green jobs'. The authors draw on considerable research to show that while climate capitalism has a lot of potential, achieving the right workforce and skills for the new jobs will be extremely challenging. This is especially so, given volatile international geopolitics, the evident dominance of multinational corporations in renewable industries, and even the singular vagueness about what is a 'green job'.

The future of jobs and work is also the focus of **Lee, Foley, Tapsell, Cooper**, in their fine article, **Promise and peril: Gender, technology, and the future of work in the legal profession**. The article was the first one accepted in the *ELRR* double-blind review process for the forthcoming (June 2025) Themed Collection, Gender and Work – Emerging Issues. This theme is such an important topic that the Call for Papers yielded very many more high-quality articles than would fit any one Themed Collection. In their article here, these authors have given us permission to include their wonderful manuscript in this issue. The rigorous and lively article seeks understand the gendered impacts of technological change, especially with regard to women in the law. The research found that while new technology offers women lawyers some flexibility and career sustainability, pervasive gendered imbalance seems likely to continue and the continuing dominance of male lawyers appears assured, especially with regard to women's access to senior roles.

Also dealing with gender and work, economists **Nwaka and Ike**, through the lens of Sustainable Development Goals, find similar imbalances in the vastly different situation of home-based work by local entrepreneurs. In their cogent article, **Disentangling the gender-differentiated determinants of home-based self-employment choices in Nigeria**, using an interesting mix of analytical techniques, Nwaka and Ike seek to understand the socioeconomic factors which affect choices about home-based self-employment (HBS), especially with regard to home ownership and determinant factors,

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such as individuals' priorities, flexibility, and family needs. Acknowledging the gendered attributes of HBS, Nwaka and Ike conclude with a useful overview of practical policy possibilities.

In another major geographical leap, the next article by **Srikanth, Baker, Meischke, Seixas, and Zuidema** explored **Factors associated with construction apprenticeship completion in the United States**. They begin with the assumption of the centrality of the construction industry for infrastructure and the economy, and concomitantly assert that maintaining an appropriately skilled workforce is also essential. Drawing on the massive Registered Apprenticeship Partners Information Database System database, these authors undertake a fine-grained analysis of cancellations, continuation and completions of construction apprenticeships in USA. As well as finding that unionisation is an important factor in continuation, one conclusion the authors highlight is that 'factors that impact recruitment and retention of females and racially minoritised workers into apprenticeship programmes can promote equity both within and outside the workplace'.

Also exploring factors affecting work and working conditions in the United States, the lively and well-written **Cascading Employment as Paradigmatic Form of Precarious Work: The Case of IT Agency Workers in the United States** investigates one growing form of precarious employment, Cascading employment is 'where an employer places a worker in a client's workplace through a sequence of labour intermediaries, with no direct contractual relationship between the worker's employer and the end client'. Such obfuscation of the employment relationship will have negative consequences for workers, as sole author **Xiaochen Liang**, demonstrates. Certainly, it is shown to lead to wage uncertainty, low pay, and lesser working conditions. Moreover, as Liang convincingly argues, these cannot be adequately dealt with because the difficulties of identifying employers in the muddied hierarchies means there are major challenges to regulatory effectiveness.

One more continental hop in this issue brings the reader south to Colombia where **Florez and Gómez** have investigated **The impact of skill mismatch on unemployment, informality, and labour turnover**. In explaining their research, the authors note that Colombia is a developing country with one of the highest levels of unemployment and informality. These economists use aggregate panel data at the city level for 23 main cities in Colombia and 'with a quarterly frequency for the period 2010–2019', to identify effects on the workers' job changes and separations, looking especially at impacts on informality in the labour market. Among their recommendations to limit or ameliorate skill mismatch, the authors recommend human capital policies and better education and training which take greater heed of business needs.

The next two articles are from scholars in Spain, but vastly different in their topic, theory, and method. In the first **Vaquero** explores the **Effectiveness of Short-Time Work schemes: A Comparative Approach to the Spanish Case**. In the comprehensive and thorough comparative examination of short-time work schemes (STW) that developed during the first years of the pandemic, Vaquero offers considerable insights into costs and impact of such schemes. While the author shows they had differential effects in different countries of the EU, they also demonstrate how evidence generally points to their worth as temporary mechanisms to limit unemployment in 'emergencies' such as the pandemic. As Vaquero concludes in recommending further exploration of best-case implementation, 'it should be noted that the Spanish case provides ample support – but not strictly causal evidence – of the success of the COVID-19 STW programmes in Spain'.

In another testimony to the *ELRR*'s multidisciplinarity, the article from **Garzón Espinosa** titled **Monetary sovereignty and external constraints: identifying the flaws of Modern Monetary Theory** (MMT) shows how economic theory can be strengthened. Proponents of MMT assume that 'a State has monetary sovereignty when it issues the currency it uses, when it allows it to float freely in the market, and when the public debt

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issued is denominated in the currency it issues'. In a very readable clinical analysis of MMT, Garzón Espinosa demonstrates why there is a serious gap insofar as MMTers 'focus only on purely macroeconomic aspects and ignore political and geopolitical issues'.

The penultimate scholarly article in this issue shifts the focus to China in which **Yeerken and Feng** sought to make theoretical and practical contributions to scholarly literature in **The impact of global value chain position on wage income inequality: Empirical evidence from Chinese listed companies**. The authors draw on a rich and complex set of microdata from Chinese listed companies, 'exploring the relationship between a firm's global value chain (GVC) embedding position and its internal income inequality at the micro-level of enterprises'. They investigate and analyse further, then cogently reveal the underlying mechanisms which enhance inequality, as becomes evident, for example, in questioning inequality between 'top management and frontline employees'.

The last peer-reviewed academic article is a ***Contested Terrains*** article, that is a peer-reviewed article which meets all the basic requirements of a short academic article, but which may be more polemical, and which seeks to provoke debate among scholars and policymakers. The multi-authored article **European Social Model after the Great Recession: An economic recovery that is not genuinely inclusive** is just such an exemplary Contested Terrains. The authors, **Bilbao-Ubillos, Intxaurburu, Ochando-Claramunt and Ullibarri-Arce**, set out to question the extent to which the European Social Model (ESM) had, as had been its primary objective, brought about greater economic equality as well as economic growth. Their analysis focused on European countries, and in a convincing and lively argument they provide strong case for the claim that 'the EU has pursued an economic recovery that is not truly inclusive, despite the theoretical framework of the ESM'.

Following the Contested Terrains article are four book reviews, which is the most we have had for some time. The first two are by the same author. In his inimitable style, **Dabscheck** first surveys and critiques Gary Mucciaroni's **Answers to the Labour Question: Industrial Relations and the State in the Anglophone World**, and then offers insights into Nobel Prize economist Joseph Stiglitz' book **The Road To Freedom: Economics and the Good Society**. The latter two book reviews are Thrower's excellent review of Ben Spies-Butcher's **Politics, Inequality and the Australian Welfare State After Liberalisation**, and Heino's vivid and astute exploration of Eugene Schofield-Georgeson, **Contract, Labour Law and the Realities of Working Life**. It is truly excellent to have not only, increasing numbers of book reviews, but also such provocative and thoughtful reviews.

The final item in this issue is a wonderful poignant tribute from *ELRR* Emerita Editor, Dr Anne **Junor**, to our much admired, recently deceased colleague and Assistant Editor, **Tanya Maree Carney 25 September 1972–24 September 2024**, she had died just before her 52nd birthday. We greatly miss Tanya's collegiality, kindness, and all her work for and with the journal. She was a long-time stalwart and a grand colleague, as Junor's obituary demonstrates.

Finally … – as you perhaps know, academic journals depend on a wealth of talent, expertise and time from authors, Associate Editors, Guest Editors, and reviewers – bless you all and thank you for everything you gave in 2024. Thank you also to the *ELRR* Editorial Board who act as Associate Editors, tiebreaker reviewers and generally wise mentors, and to our expert and patient Technical Coordinator Jason Antony whose enthusiasm and skill with various kinds of software is unbounded. Finally, a very big thank you to our Emerita Editor, Dr Anne Junor who has unstintingly proffered wise insights, immensely helpful advice, and a lot of hard work to help *ELRR* a great journal over decades – and as ever throughout 2024.

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