COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Should unproductive academics be made redundant?

*The Sydney Morning Herald, April 14, 2012, p12*

**THE QUESTION**

“The current process looks a little ham-fisted,” says Andrew McRae.

Researchers who don't publish enough are in the firing line.

**THE CRITIC NICK RIEMER**

How to assess academic productivity? At Sydney University, the question couldn't be more relevant: in November, management announced that it had made a serious budgetary mistake and would slash underperforming staff in order to pursue IT and building improvements. Although officially, research is only 40 per cent of academics' responsibilities, management retrospectively introduced a new performance test, just to purge staff. Anyone who hadn't published at least four articles in less than three years was threatened. This basic violation of natural justice was astonishing, particularly from managers who continually profess their commitment to high-minded, progressive values.

Like other workplaces, universities have performance management processes. These, not redundancy, are the answer to underperformance. But how to respond to a failure of management?

The cuts have provoked an outcry. With its simplistic measures, how will Sydney maintain research quality, when the finest researchers couldn't possibly teach and publish consistently at the rate administrators demand? How can management sack staff with classrooms already so crowded?
Sydney's administrators have not been so different from their counterparts elsewhere. Administrators everywhere are trying to shrink their already overstretched academic workforces. Universities, apparently, just don't need academics.

Talk of values such as productivity serves to justify managers' failure to promote the conditions necessary for universities to function. Local managerialism is the polar opposite of world's best practice - such as in the US Ivy League - and shows parallels with the disastrous financialisation of the global economy.

University technocrats are the equivalent of the regulators whose negligence caused the GFC. Just as markets favoured complex financial instruments far removed from commodities, so too universities have been alienated from their basic rationale by an ascendency of executives hostile to the principles that should govern academic communities: respect for students and staff; research unfettered by philistine "productivity" requirements; security of academic tenure; uncasualised labour; low student-staff ratios. These are the ways to guarantee academic "productivity", rather than its bureaucratic substitutes.

It is the managers who are unproductive. Systemic managerial failures are compromising quality.

*Dr Nick Riemer teaches in the Sydney University linguistics and English departments.*

**THE STUDENT FREYA BUNDEY**

In November, Sydney University students received an email from the Vice-Chancellor, Michael Spence, explaining that fee incomes for this year were lower than expected. The university had got its budgeting projections wrong. We were soon to learn that 340 staff members who were not "pulling their weight" would no longer be "carried".

My former lecturer in Chinese history, Helen Dunstan, is one such staff member. In 2007, Helen was elected Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. She spent the 2011-12 summer holidays completing a new book. And in my classes, she went far beyond the already demanding expectations placed on lecturers. She taught every single class tutorial, worked individually with students to develop essay topics and helped us in accessing primary research material usually beyond the reach of undergraduates.

Does she have four publications to her name between January 1, 2009, and November 4, 2010? No, she does not. Does she – or any other staff member on Spence’s list – deserve redundancy based on this retrospective and arbitrary criterion? Not if your priority is quality education.

The academic redundancies reflect the spending priorities of an administration obsessed with increasing its competitiveness through cost cutting and higher staff workloads. The university has justified the staff cuts in these very terms, saying: “In a similar vein, the Australian National University announced on 26 March it needed to cut costs to ‘invest in outstanding people, world-class equipment and more efficient processes’. If we stand still we will be left behind.”

When asked why staff were being targeted on the basis of research performance, the university responded: “As a research-intensive university, we are judged, and receive funding, based on our research performance.”
But the redundancies are reflective of much broader trends: decreasing government funding, increased reliance on student fees (up 7per cent this year alone), worse student-staff ratios and the casualisation of teaching staff.

This is why students have overwhelmingly rejected the redundancies; why 4000 have signed petitions, why 1500 rallied last week, and why more than 70 lecture halls passed motions. We want to study in an environment where debate and discussion flourish; where teachers are respected and supported. And, as we have demonstrated, we are prepared to fight for it.

*Freya Bundey is an honours student in political economy at Sydney University and a member of the Student Representative Council.*

**THE EXPAT ANDREW McRAE**

For many people, the kerfuffle at the University of Sydney will appear strange. A relatively small number of people, in a very large organisation, are being identified as having underperformed. In some cases, they have barely performed one part of their job – research – at all. In any other area of work, we would probably expect such people to lose their jobs. What if a GP decided she didn’t much like dealing with the common cold? In a university, however, this becomes a crisis.

Although the root cause of the cuts may be a sorry story of financial mismanagement, the university’s response looks right. For the first time in memory, its managers are systematically tackling underperformance.

I worked at the university from 1992 to 1999, and spent a lot of time wondering why nobody was doing this. I wondered, in particular, why some people paid to research rarely managed to evidence their activity by publishing books and articles. Four years ago, I was interviewed for a professorship but withdrew from the competition, in part, because it seemed nothing much had changed.

All this said, the current process looks a little ham-fisted. An academic, says deputy vice-chancellor Stephen Garton, should publish three papers in three years. But what about quality? Hiding behind metrics is not only gutless, it misses a chance to make a point about quality. Perhaps British universities overdo it. We’re endlessly grading each other’s publications and judging the work of other departments. But there’s a point to trusting academics to judge their peers, and credible assessments could help Sydney University now.

And what about teaching quality? The union does a disservice to the work of its members by describing non-research positions as “demotions”. These arrangements, common and accepted elsewhere in the world, could save careers and refocus minds on the university’s core business.

The University of Sydney has suffered from a history of questionable appointments, inadequate mentoring, and lack of reward for excellence. Some of those now wielding the axe must bear a share of responsibility for these conditions, while some of those about to lose their jobs might have flourished under better management. One can only hope these redundancies will mark a turning point.

*Professor Andrew McRae is associate dean of education at the University of Exeter.*
THE COMMENTATOR ANDREW NORTON

The dispute over redundancies at the University of Sydney seems particularly bitter, but university retrenchments are not unusual. The Australian National University and Macquarie University are also planning job cuts.

Unlike the manufacturing industry, universities are not shrinking their workforces just to survive. The international student boom is over, but domestic student numbers and research funding are growing. Most job changes are, as university leaders like to say, “strategic”. They are aimed at achieving a better return on the money and effort invested in research.

For many years, university research funding has been influenced by the performance of its academics. The slogan “publish or perish” has long warned academics that research activity is important to their careers.

More recently, the focus has shifted from quantity to quality. The Australian Research Council has rated disciplines in each university. Some disciplines were rated as “above world standard”. However, about a third of research areas assessed were rated as below world standard. Their universities will receive less money as a result. Global university rankings have also exposed Australian universities to critical scrutiny. There are practical consequences from a low score.

The University of Sydney is particularly concerned by its position. In the latest Shanghai Jiao Tong ranking, the most highly regarded of the university rankings, Sydney came 96th. That’s respectable in a list of 500, but it is well below the 60th ranked University of Melbourne, and also below the ANU and the University of Queensland.

These funding and reputation pressures are driving university behaviour. They are focusing resources on disciplines and academics that best contribute to the university’s overall research performance. No performance system is perfect, and some academics, probably rightly, feel their work is underrated. But with billions of public dollars invested in higher education research each year, universities should use this money as effectively as possible. An increasing average of publications per academic and Australian universities improving their Jiao Tong rankings, suggest strategies are working.

There is a gain to this process, as well as the more obvious pain of job losses.

Andrew Norton is the higher education program director at the Grattan Institute.