CHANGING ACADEMIC IDENTITIES AND THE DISCOURSE OF TENURE

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Abstract

Changes to the political economy of universities have challenged academics' identity, as universities have evolved from medieval enclaves to the heart of the knowledge economy. Tenure was traditionally at the core of this identity, marking the academic's full acceptance into the university community. In 1998, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) ordered universities to increase the numbers of staff on 'continuing' appointments. While hailed as a victory for the academics' union and its members, the AIRC decision did not completely succeed in reviving the discourse of tenure, instead providing an alternative terminology embedded in the managerialist discourse. This paper examines the implementation of the AIRC decision at one university. It focuses on university management's strategy to colonise the discourse of tenure, to mould it to support its vision of the modern enterprise university, and the barriers it encountered. Middle management, for example, found it difficult to reconcile their twin identities of "'manager" and "academic". The paper explores the crucial role of the subject, the academics themselves, and their contribution to the new discourse as they struggle to define their role in the new environment.

Introduction

The myth of the tenured don, "with only his conscience to divide his time between the alternatives of assiduous teaching, original research, ritual scholarship, learned passivity, guilty sloth, free dinners and good booze" (Stretton, 1965, p. 96) provides a colourful image, but one far removed from the modern academic. Discourses of academic work, including the discourse of tenure, have changed as universities have undergone changes, characterised by the new culture of managerialism.

The discourse of tenure was mobilised by academics' unions, which sought to guarantee greater industrial security for their members. In 1998, the Australian academics' union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), convinced the Australian Industrial Relations Commission that the level of short-term and casual staff in universities was too high, and that more academics should be offered continuing appointments.

This paper examines how, in the implementation of this decision, one university management was able to mobilise the discourse of tenure, to promote a model of academic work that was more in harmony with the modern managerialist agenda. The case study examines how HR officials, academic managers, and academics have all participated in the redefinition of tenure. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Knights and Willmott (1989, 1999; Willmott, 1993), Alvesson (2001), and others, the paper emphasizes the importance of the subject in the creation of the 'new tenure' discourse, before proposing a possible path of resistance.

Background

The *Higher Education Contract of Employment (HECE) Award 1998* required universities to reduce the number of staff on short-term contract and casual appointments, and increase the number of staff on permanent ("continuing") appointments. Although not a new term, most participants in the sector assumed that "continuing" meant much the same as the traditional, non-industrial term, 'tenure'.

Tenure, the right of an academic to occupy a position for life, originates from attempts to guarantee academic freedom. It was a protection from outside interference. In medieval universities, sustained by ecclesiastical or imperial patronage, "academic freedom (became) a demand asserted against religion" (Minogue, 1973, p.32). As universities became secular bodies, academic freedom was maintained to preserve independence from the state. De George (1997) stresses that academic tenure "is not the same as a guarantee of continuous employment", and that the industrial conditions of the employee are not the primary concern (p. 4). Machlup (1996) contends that tenure is an altruistic proposition protecting the academic from unjustified university punishment and 'serves the purposes of society, not of individual teachers or institutions' (p. 25).

The onset of managerialism, including changes to organisational regimes and cultures to 'more closely resemble those in the private, for-profit sector' (Deem, 1998, p. 50) has threatened the discourse of tenure. Marceau (1996) describes competing discourses originating from a tension in the roles of education: education was to fulfil both socially unifying and socially sorting functions. 'The language and imperative disguised within [managerialism] are transforming the organisational structures to which they apply' (Marceau, 1996, p. 70). This transformation has seen academics lose control over much of their work to a new managerial class (Miller, 1995; Rhoades, 1998). Once the traditional 'discourse of academic freedom and tenure' became insufficient to protect the interests of academics, academic unions became adept at incorporating strong industrial solidarity into the traditional discourse based on collegiality (O'Brien, 1993, p. 210). But this response from the union typifies the concessions that Hartley (1995), extending Ritzer's (1993) McDonaldization thesis, terms "fake fraternisation" (p. 419): the union's engagement with management's appeals to professional values distracts them from the erosion of professional accountability.

The *HECE* decision is an example of this. Utilising the structures of the industrial relations system, the academic union challenged the predominating managerialist discourse to assert the continuing relevance of the discourse of tenure. The study looks at how this success was followed through during the implementation phase at one university, the University of Eastern Australia (UEA)[1]. At UEA, senior management quickly agreed with union representatives that staff in fixed-term jobs but who were doing ongoing work would be automatically converted to 'continuing', having the same status as staff who were already permanent or 'tenured' (although this word was no longer part of the formal university vocabulary).

This unusual scenario emphasises how universities and academic work, although increasingly subject to market forces, retain a number of distinct features.

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[1] The names of the university and participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

First, as discussed earlier, the discourse of tenure is grounded in pre-capitalist notions of freedom. Second, ironically, while academics bemoan the intrusion of managerialism, the managerial class in universities consists mostly of academics themselves (Moodie, 1995). There is a fusion of 'academic' and 'manager' identities. Third, universities and academics are at the core of the 'knowledge work' phenomenon, exposing them to the potential as well as the problems of the 'global economy' (Mackinnon and Brooks, 2001, p. 1). These factors and others point to the 'eternally incomplete' managerialist hegemony within universities, and inform the 'multiple sites for the emergence of counter-hegemonic discourses' (Currie and Vidovich, 1998, p. 136).

Method
This case study draws on two sources of data. First, interviews were conducted with key informants: union and Human Resource (HR) officials, managers at all levels of the university, and academic staff who had undergone the 'conversion' to continuing status. These managers and academics were drawn from three faculties. In total, seventeen semi-structured interviews were held. Second, university and union archives provided rich documentary evidence of reports, position papers, and meeting notes. This triangulation of source and subject allowed an analysis of the contribution of senior management, the union, middle managers and academics to the HECE implementation process. A common theme across all these parties was how the HECE decision had further disturbed changing meanings of tenure.

Results
It was quickly apparent that contests of meaning extended beyond the concerted efforts of the university senior management, although they prosecuted their case zealously. The fuller picture details an intense collaboration between senior management, the union, middle management, and academics. Each of these is discussed in turn, focusing on how all parties have contributed to an inversion of trust in the relationship between academic and university.

UEA management grasped the opportunity presented by the HECE decision to abandon the use of the term 'tenure', and implemented the categories of continuing, fixed-term, and casual, set out in the *HECE* Award. The multiple connotations implicit in the word tenure were impossible to manage. One reason was the word possessed a meaning peculiar to academia. A senior manager saw a special exemption for academics as incompatible with the reality that

> *We were moving towards a climate like the rest of the world [where] people are now engaged to do the work that they're meant to do and if there's no work, then there's no work. [Maureen, senior manager*]

HR took opportunities to proselytise the university community to the new language of academic work:

> *I did say at many open forums to both staff and management that the HECE Award has replaced the notion of tenure. That's how I used to talk about it. It has changed and replaced the notion of tenure. [Maureen, senior manager]*

By setting out to remove tenure from the language of academics, UEA management sought to remove a reminder of the autonomy and immunity that tenure represented for academics.

In this pursuit, they were actually assisted by the union. The union was concerned that academics gained a false sense of security and expectation from the term, and that it no longer reflected the industrial protection available to academic staff:

> *In the early 1990s, we were moving away from using the word. Because the word in a way had a non-industrial connotation. It was something that academics had that could not be broken and that was often used as a weapon against us. Whereas the industrial reality… was that academics could be sacked. [Alison, Union Official]*

Although it served a very important role in the identity of their members, one union official indicated that tenure was something that was lost to the past:

> *I think tenure is something that we can't get back. And it was probably never as strong as [members] thought it was, and the management was never as determined [as they are now]. [Bruce, Union Official]*

Both the union and the university assumed that 'tenure' was not a part of UEA academics' vocabularies.

This was not the case, however. Academics and middle managers alike referred to tenure as a current condition of staff. Among academic staff, comments such as this were common:

> *I am not aware of the difference. If people ask me, what are you, well I say I'm on an ongoing appointment, and when they say what does that mean, I say well, they used to call it tenure. [Joachim, Lecturer]*

One academic staff dismissed a senior university manager's attempts to convert staff to the new terminology:

> *What is ongoing employment? It is a new term but where is it defined? The DVC says tenure is not worth the paper it's written on. [But] people who have ongoing status have the same academic rights as tenured academics.*
> *[Alan, Lecturer]*

Academic managers were also likely to refer to tenure in the present tense, although they were more circumspect:

> *I think in principle any university could decide to make staff redundant if it felt, so tenure as a job for life … I don't think that exists any more. But protection of the rights of staff to express their views in an uninhibited way, yes, that does still exist. [John, Head of School]*

The significance of the new language was not lost on one manager:

> *We basically have tenure by another name [but] it's not as good as the old*
> *system. It lacks the long-term commitment. The word 'continuing': the*
> *language is less committed on both parts. [Paul, Head of School]*

This 'C' word- commitment- formed an important part of the identity of the academic. It afforded the academic security to pursue the isolating work of research and scholarship.

The research revealed a shift toward a new source of security, based on a new 'C' word- confidence. University management sought to emphasise that good academics should possess enough confidence in their abilities not to need external gestures like formal tenure. For example, one university scheme allows some academics to 'trade-in' their tenure for a salary increase. One senior manager explained the effect as follows:

> *People who have got enough confidence in themselves couldn't care less about*
> *tenure. Because they believe that, one, they'll do a good job anyway and going*
> *from contract to contract doesn't matter anyway and, two, if the unthinkable*
> *happened and as a result of downsizing they lost their job, if they were good*
> *enough they'd pick up another one anyway. They might as well get the salary*
> *loading, which when you think about it is money for jam if you've got*
> *confidence in yourself. In some ways, tenure can be a thing for holding back*
> *an academic staff member. [Thomas, Dean]*

Tenure is ascribed a pejorative meaning here. The meaning is subtly reinforced by the Vice-Chancellor's statement announcing UEA's HECE implementation approach:

> *The contract staff in universities are some of our very best staff and I think it is*
> *only fair that they be given a crack. (Media report)*

The language of senior university mangers made it clear that any new bargain for tenure would emphasise confidence and not commitment as its basis.

Some academic staff interviewed also demonstrate signs of identifying with this discourse. Primarily, there is an understanding of the bargain required for 'new tenure'. One newer academic commented:

> *I know there is a difference, because I can have to keep meeting certain*
> *performance criteria but I'm comfortable in my own ability to do that, so I see*
> *it as tenure. [Phil, Lecturer]*

Academics interviewed appear to tolerate a higher degree of managerial control than in the past, but only because academia still offers greater autonomy than other alternative careers. This comment from a young academic was typical:

> *I didn't like working in the large corporate atmosphere. Management there*
> *are much more intrusive and onerous. I'm the type of person who likes to be*
> *self-motivated and managed. [Richard, Lecturer]*

Autonomy at the day-to-day level remains important for many academic staff.

Academics interviewed reported a high commitment to students and to their discipline. For example, one academic said:

> *People in this job are loyal to the students. You don't get loyal to an organisation. Not in the modern world anyway. ...What I do for my profession is profoundly interesting. UEA provides the right environment, especially now that it puts me in some sort of control of my employment. [David, Lecturer]*

Loyalty to the institution is much more conditional. The basis of tenure, and of the academic identity, has been directed away from the university and onto the individual, creating a freedom characterised as much by the negative aspects of self-discipline as by the positive aspects (Knights & Willmott, 1989, p. 551).

Discussion

A recasting of the discourse of tenure was an ambitious project for the senior management of UEA to undertake. Indeed, this "slimmed-down" tenure "provides the interpretive framework within which specific managerial policies are laundered" (Keenoy and Anthony, 1992, p. 241). UEA's washing basket included a range of new managerial processes, such as performance management and workforce planning, on which this "new tenure" was predicated. This development sought to constrain academics with a reconstituted reality; a reality whose meaning relies heavily on the parameters established by managerialism. Here, institution and academic embark together on a committed relationship, sustained by a constant flow of customers and dollars, but 'if there's no work, then there's no work'. This discourse, where the identity of the academic is tied to the economic success of the institution, has been labelled the 'academic as corporate professional' (McCollow and Lingard, 1996, p. 15). The rhetoric of 'confidence' is affirmed through the surveillance of modern management tools.

Here, by seeking to connect long-held values of the academic profession with the modern political economy of higher education, UEA management requires academics to simultaneously 'recognise and take responsibility for the relationship between the security of their employment and their contribution to the competitiveness of the goods and services they produce' (Willmott, 1993, p. 522). Tying the mission of workers to the pre-determined goals of the organization by generating a commitment to the organisation is a common feature of today's 'knowledge workforce'. Barrett (2001) found that knowledge workers in a software development firm developing new products 'exercised technical autonomy' but this autonomy 'occurred within and was controlled by the parameters set by the user's requirements and the firm's needs for commercial success' (p. 16). Deetz (1997) argues that in knowledge-intensive groups, 'a strong culture and shared internalized values often provide control and coordination in the place of authority relations and direct supervision', which may be inhibited by the lack of definable and measurable outputs, and strong professional codes, among other reasons (p. 85). A focus on culture and shared values reiterates that this is not a bargain in the strict sense: academics are participating within the new hegemonic discourse of academic work.

And yet, from the interviews it is clear that the university has not succeeded in generating compliance with this new discourse through institutional bonds. Although

the familiar routine of cynically complying provides suspicious academics with a '(precarious) sense of stability and identity' (Willmott, 1993, p. 539), the extent and depth of this cynicism makes it difficult to assert that the university has succeeded in reconstituting the identity of academics through the discourse of tenure. The university could not rely on an academics' attachment to a corporate ideology as a 'cultural control' (Alvesson, 2001, p. 879) to regulate identity.

The attitudes of the university's 'middle managers', the heads of school, were a key obstacle to further identity regulation. When charting the 'processes of interaction' whereby 'identity is confirmed, challenged, defended or transformed', the identities of managers warrant as much consideration as those of workers (Knights and Willmott, 1999, p. 146). The identity of heads of school is complex and atypical. They are drawn mostly from the ranks of senior academics, and are grounded to appreciate the 'substantive endeavours of academics as teachers and researchers' and yet their new role requires them to prioritise 'controlling processes' that reinforce the managerial chain of command (Miller, 1998, p. 7). Their academic background has inhibited the development of a 'higher education management professional' identity (Moodie, 1995). Conflict between management imperatives and deeply held academic values may lead to a difficult denial of personal morality (Knights and Willmott, 1999, p. 135).

This conflict must be resolved somehow. Alexiadou (2001) observes that front-line managers in British further education institutions, which have also transformed to a managerialist model, frequently become 'colluded selves' who adopt a 'responsive manager' identity. This conception attempts to preserve a 'pedagogic discourse' while at the same time 'pragmatically accommodating' market-driven change (Alexiadou, 2001, p. 417), and is evident at UEA in both John's acknowledgement of the reality of redundancy, and Paul's comments on the lack of commitment in the new language. In both, there is the sense that, however unfortunate, change has occurred nonetheless. The 'responsive manager' identity is also evident in this comment from a research fellow about the complex reporting processes of the university:

> *The middle management and school management are very good. In my experience, they keep that stuff at bay to allow people to get on with things. [Richard, Lecturer]*

For significant change to occur, HR strategy needed to move beyond the institutional level, and beyond the role of managers, and focus on the subjects themselves.

It is in the subject that we find the greatest impact of the new discourse as well as the greatest potential for resistance. An inversion of 'confidence' characterises the academic subject's transformation. Instead of tenure being a display of confidence on the part of the university in the abilities of the academic (van Alstyne, 1996, p. 9), in this new discourse the academic must assume the burden of confidence, which is constantly reassessed, through measures like performance management programmes as well as restructures, realignments and other shifts in corporate direction and operating environment. Academics continue to believe in tenure, but only within the parameters of 'doing their job' and 'meeting the criteria'. Definitions of 'job' and 'criteria' though are beyond the control of the academic, but the need for the academic identity, bound up in the discourse of tenure, is so strong that they subscribe to the

definitions anyway. And academics continue to believe that their profession accords them a great degree of autonomy and freedom, unaware of the self-disciplining effect (Knights and Willmott, 1989, p. 550) of their adherence to the discourse of tenure. Control is most effectively assured through 'subjectification', producing 'a standard to which employees become committed' (Alvesson, 2001, p. 881).

For this reason, characterizing modern academics as 'self-employed producers… [who] define their own work, but production for the market takes priority over any other purpose' (Marginson, 1995, pp. 332-333) is misleading. The conception vastly overstates the autonomy that academics possess. Management has assumed greater control over what that work will be, yet academics have not lost all control, and they have limited agency to bargain, resulting in a "curious collusion" (Miller, 1995, p. 117) between academics and management. The revolution of participatory mechanisms in universities, where collegiality has lost out to the management tools of performance management and strict regimes of planning, has hastened "paradoxes of identity" (Stohl and Cheney, 2001, p. 379). Issues of participation are brought into play as academics question the right of senior managers to issue judgments on group values:

> *What is ongoing employment? It is a new term but where is it defined? The DVC says tenure is not worth the paper it's written on. [But] people who have ongoing status have the same academic rights as tenured academics. [Alan, Lecturer]*

This demonstrates the limits of a managerial strategy based on self-management. For academics at UEA, a compatibility paradox emerges because "processes of participating do not match the prevailing organizational cultural milieu even though they reflect the organization's desires" (Stohl and Cheney, 2001, p. 384). The paradox stems from the fact that, while collegial fragments may remain in the "cultural milieu", corporatisation of universities has superimposed a "climate of fear" where organizational desires are set through top-down decision-making and enforced through "persistent rumours… of redundancies, restructures and cuts" (Bessant, 2002, p. 81).

Unsurprisingly, any sense of involvement or participation within the organisation is threatened:

> *People in this job are loyal to the students. You don't get loyal to an organisation. [David, Lecturer]*

Failing to reassert a sense of "voice" and unable to commit to "loyalty, rededication [or] adaptation", at first glance, academics have adopted a coping strategy of "neglect or determined ignorance" (Stohl and Cheney, 2001, pp. 393-395.) Organisational participation is downgraded to the level of "getting back to their jobs with the least disruption in work routines possible" (Stohl and Cheney, 2001, p. 395). As Stohl and Cheney emphasise, this response to paradox "is in many ways the most destructive because it tends to perpetuate itself" (p. 395). A potential solution involves new organisations in collectively expressing these values and potentially offers the more productive coping strategy of mental "exit, secession, or spin-off" (Stohl and Cheney, 2001: 393), while academics remain nominally attached to the university. In this way,

the potential for counter-hegemonic discourses can be acted upon (Currie and Vidovich, 1998, p. 136).

The academics' instinctive invocation of academic values, as a defence, suggests that a collective resistance to the 'new tenure' may be based around the shared identity of global discipline and field-of-study groupings. Although global bodies are not new, new communication technologies have enhanced their potential to grow from providing networking and mentoring to a source of identity as significant as the identity academics currently derive from their university appointments. Global associations could revive the expression of 'collective confidence' that has been supplanted in the 'new tenure' discourse by 'individual confidence'. New, global groupings might avoid the undemocratic and exclusive tendencies that frequently troubled collegial structures within traditional universities (Deem, 1998; Miller, 1995) and would be sufficiently flexible to accommodate membership drawn from diverse backgrounds, following the "fragmentation within institutions and across the system" (Currie and Vidovich, 1998, p. 139). Such groupings could provide the intellectual basis to develop "a new politics of truth" (Foucault, 1984, p. 74 in Willmott, 1993, p. 542).

Conclusion

The *HECE* Award marked another point in the industrialisation of academic work, and afforded UEA senior management with an opportunity to colonise the discourse of tenure. A deliberate strategy, focussed on discourse and language, was launched, which succeeded in undermining the intent of the Award itself. The central concept of 'confidence' provided a means of drawing together hard and soft elements of the strategy: a new discourse emphasising the responsibility and position of the individual and the surveillance mechanisms aimed at assessing confidence.

An attempt to achieve 'cultural control' through mobilising a corporate ideology did not succeed. In particular, academic managers, who remain torn between competing discourses of managerialism and academic professionalism, adopted a mediating rather than a proselytising position. Nonetheless, academics have begun to reconstruct their self-identity to accommodate the inversion of confidence. Over-estimating the autonomy that academics possess in their work denies the extent of self-disciplining that academics perform, to take account of how managerialism has transformed the work of universities. Although counter-hegemonic discourses are forming, how these could be channelled into more productive responses to this paradox of identity remains under-explored.

The great paradox of this study is that while our starting point of the *HECE* decision sought to emphasise the 'continuing' bond between university and academic, the discursive formations that flowed from the UEA's response to the decision have succeeded in undermining that bond, alienating the subject from a crucial part of their identity. For all parties involved at UEA, the contribution of discourse, both strategic and emergent, has been as significant as the *HECE* Award itself.

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