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"Nousferatu": Are corporate consultants extracting the lifeblood from universities?

Deb Verhoeven (iD) and Ben Eltham (iD)

ABSTRACT

Universities and management consultants are locked in a *danse macabre*. We turn to the vampire genre to elaborate on the relationship of consulting companies to the university sector, focusing on the University of Alberta in Canada and Monash University in Australia. We are academics with long experience of the consequences of change management and the employment of consultants in universities. Deb is sufficiently "long in the tooth" that her entire career spans the period of heightened government and private sector intervention in Australian universities that began in the late 1980s and more recently she has had the experience of watching this process occur again, at speed, in Canada. Ben is a representative of the National Tertiary Education Union at Australia's largest university. He is also an experienced journalist who has reported on Australian higher education and public policy for more than two decades. The essay argues that consultants and universities are engaged in a mutually dependent relationship designed to sustain each other at the expense of the public.

Introduction: Workload creep(s)

We seem to be drifting into unknown places and unknown ways. Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897, p. 395)

As a heuristic tool for describing and processing the nature of change in university workplaces, the horror genre leaps to hand. There is a rich literature on the "zombiefication" of academics and academic cultures (Gora & Whelan, 2010; Katz, 2016; Ryan, 2012; Whelan et al., 2013). For Whelan et al. (2013), the zombie serves to describe the lifelessness of contemporary universities that have emerged, staggering, from apocalyptic refinancing and restructuring. They elaborate the figure of the zombie as a sign of "what it means to occupy the field of contemporary higher education" (Whelan et al., 2013, p. 3). The scenes they depict draw feverishly from

George Romero's classic horror movie, *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), in which universities are the ramshackle farmhouses harboring haggard academic survivors against marauding waves of voracious bureaucratic zombies … or alternatively, in which academics are unwillingly "infected" by institutionalized zombie processes, designed to devitalize and demonize (Whelan et al., 2013, p. 5).

For Suzanne Ryan, the zombie motif is important, not as an explanation of desperate if doomed pushback against the prospect of corporate contagion, but for making sense of the compliant acceptance of institutional mutation by academic employees. She asks, "Does our active collusion in undermining our own interests indicate the depth of zombiefication to which we have sunk, or is it simply a symptom of a stressed and shrinking workforce?" (Ryan, 2012, p. 6). Ryan answers her own conundrum by suggesting that zombiefication is an individual tactic of withdrawal—a way for academics to survive the cognitive dissonance between their values and their workplaces, or a temporary psychological shelter from the storm of neo-liberalism. Academics, according to Ryan, neither accept nor resist, but are suspended in a lifeless stasis, consoling themselves that one day they might return with a vengeance. As Ken Gelder (2013) notes, these readings are themselves subject to a kind of zombiefication at the level of rhetoric. For Louise Katz (2016), the adoption of "Zombilingo" within universities is as deadening as it is dominant. Katz acknowledges the mutual dependence of Zombilingo and the vampiric rhetoric of corporatization, or "Corpspeak," in the academy:

> Although Corpspeak and Zombilingo are closely related, there are important differences. Corpspeak consists of linguistic imports into education from the business imaginary… Zombilingo, on the other hand, exports the vocabulary of critical or creative thinkers into the business realm; these are then sold back to the academy having undergone a kind of psychic surgery. (Katz, 2016, p. 10)

Whelan et al. (2013) suggest that the gothic towers of colleges past still cast a shadow over the bandaged Franken-universities that have replaced them, in the form of a haunted longing:

> The 'ivory tower' model of the university, along with most of the other traditional archetypes of the institution, is … an undead, lingering ghoul. Given the changes that have radically reconstituted the sector over the last 30 years, these traditional imaginings are indeed dead, and yet bizarrely still alive. (Whelan et al., 2013, p. 5)

We question the implicit proposal of a pre-history of university innocence corrupted by brutal exterior forces into unrecognizable monstrosities. Rather than see universities or academics as victims of involuntary transformation who have retreated into sordid states of survival, we might wonder at the ways in which universities, and many managerial academics, have actively participated in the systems that now characterize these

workplaces. After all, universities have a long history of collaboration, and indeed instantiation, by the forces of capital and extraction. In the US, many of the so-called "land grant" universities were founded on land expropriated from First Nations and embraced principles of white settlement and colonization, as well as rampant real estate development (Ford, 2002; Sorber, 2019; Stein, 2020). Many European universities have likewise benefited from colonial exploitation and slavery. In 2018, for instance, Bristol University estimated that as much as 89% of the funds used to found the institution were derived from donations by wealthy traders with links to tobacco and chocolate cultivated by slave labor in the American south and the Caribbean (University of Bristol, 2022). Australian universities have their own history of "settler colonial epistemic violence" (Bennett et al., 2023).

To conceptualize a less simplistic narrative of imperiled contemporary universities, we turn instead to a different horror tradition: the seductive allure of vampire fiction. The zombie differs from the vampire for its mindless lack of agency and its decrepitude. Zombie narratives are stories about the evacuation of content. In vampire stories, on the other hand, content hemorrhages and contaminates. Vampire narratives are stories explicitly about cultural interpretation and the constancy of revision (see Verhoeven, 1993). Vampires mutate and invoke mutation. The meanings around them are also subject to transmutation. As noted vampire scholar Nina Auerbach (1995) observes, unlike zombies who are without individual personalities, "There is no such creature as "The Vampire"; there are only vampires" (p. 5). Vampires flourish across multiple formats—films, TV shows, novels, music, poetry—and adapt in each of these different forms. Their tastes and talents shift according to different locations and historical circumstances. Vampires are familiar to us, not necessarily because they proliferate in so many cultural formats but because they encapsulate our own, situated desires and anxieties. They are both preternatural and yet contrived by intimate relationships. The vampires we conjure are the vampires we simultaneously want (to be) and want not.

> The taboo against the vampire, then, is also a proscription against the recognition that the desire *for* the other might also be a desire to *become* the other (and vice versa) … [V]ampiric desire is both self-reproducing and incorporating of its object-choice. You are what you (rep)eat. (Verhoeven, 1993, p. 203)

This aporetic impulse at the heart of vampire tropes may help us understand the febrile impulse of university executives, and sometimes even the layers of academics beneath them, to countenance the predatory underside of institutional ideation. For Auerbach, "Vampirism springs not only from paranoia, xenophobia, or immortal longings, but also from generosity and shared enthusiasm" (Auerbach, 1995, p. vii). In this sense, vampires work

together to reestablish the systems they menace, and this makes them especially useful for understanding the mutually beneficial role of consultants in the processes of corporatization of public institutions like universities. As Brunsson and Olsen (1993) have written, the goal of management consultancies is almost always identified as change, but the most obvious effect is in fact affirmation of the status quo. "Change" becomes simultaneously excavated and rich with possibility. University managers, emboldened by strategic planning consultants, extol their newfound prowess at "agility" and "transcending boundaries," their appreciation for the sublime wonder of untrammeled "expansion" and "bold transformation," their rapacious appetite for "inclusion," giddy with excitement for tomorrow and the vertiginous thrills of ever-deepening "impact" and ever-rising "rank," always moving inexorably forward. Their snappy missions and glossy strategic plans, almost without exception recall the postwar scientistic triumphalism of Vannevar Bush's "endless frontier" (Bush, 1945)

Our own respective universities are pointed cases. The University of Alberta's 2023–2033 Draft Strategic Plan abandons gravity, and launches like the opening credits for a *Star Trek Enterprise* episode:

> Our mission is to advance education and research to the benefit of Alberta and beyond. We prepare new generations of thinkers, builders and leaders who will help our province thrive into the future … Over the past three years, the University of Alberta has undertaken a bold transformation, building a new academic structure that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries. We stand ready for the future: to accelerate collaboration across disciplines, focused on collective priorities; to educate students to solve problems and collaborate for real-world impact; to embrace partnership, collaboration, and community like never before. (University of Alberta, 2023a, p. 4)

Monash University pitches a similarly expansive vision: "In every age, people grapple with realizing hopes, surmounting testing circumstances and quelling threats. Universities have a role in understanding and providing ideas and solutions to shape and respond to the challenges they, their partners and communities experience" (Monash University, 2021, p. 6). Universities often reserve their widest over-reach for research promotion: "Think enterprising and you think Monash. We have a long and proud distinguished history of ground-breaking translational research, that together with our partners, has changed the world" (Monash University, n.d.).

These pithy mission-ary statements are intended to illustrate imagined points-of-difference between universities in an intensely competitive higher education "market," and consequently they have most meaning to other proximate universities. Take, for example, the pyrrhic battle-of-the-brands being slugged out between the rival universities of Alberta which has all but reached the rocky point of peak-provincial. The University of Alberta landed the first blow with its forward-facing, history-effacing suite of

strategic planning documents gathered under the catchphrase "U of A for Tomorrow" (University of Alberta, 2023b). In response, the University of Calgary counter-punched with the derivative, yet more insatiably frontward strategic plan titled, "UCalgary: Ahead of Tomorrow" (University of Calgary, 2023). This motto, which seems to stem from overactive use of a thesaurus, doesn't bear a nuanced semiotic analysis; being either oxymoronic or palpably impossible. Nothing, however, quite matches the inadvertent repercussions of Deakin University's 2012 rebranding, at breathtaking expense, as "Worldly" (hint: it doesn't actually mean global).

Such slogans and sentiments do not spring up unbidden in the minds of university managers. Consultants are assiduous tradespeople of these brazen institutional imaginaries. Just as the marketers hone polished brochures and clickable social media tiles, consultants assist university managements in the construction of a vision of the university as contemporary, competent, and efficient—the very model of a modern major institution. Mazzucato and Collington (2023), drawing on a phrase coined in the 1960s by NASA procurement manager Ernest Brackett, call this a type of imaginary "brochuremanship" (p. 166). In this respect, Marginson's (2000) telling phrase of the "enterprise university" has never been more appropriate than in the context of management consultants advising on metrics, cost controls, and organizational efficiencies. Consultants burnish the university's self-image, providing talking points for leaders before their "change management" video addresses (Parker, 2002), and assisting the comms team with their packaging of organizational upheaval, in a process that Alvesson (2013) has compared to "the image" construction work first explored by Boorstin (1971), and the simulacra of Baudrillard (1994).

Souled out

> Capital is dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks … Karl Marx, *Capital* (Marx, 1976, p. 342)

Marx's classic reference to capital as "vampire-like" describes the drive of capital for ever greater surplus value, by means of work intensification and the extension of the working day. Franco Berardi (2013) extends Marx's evocation of the vampiric impulse of labor management in his analysis of the "cognitariat," the laborers of info-production. He differentiates this generation of surplus labor from the ones Marx described, in that the cognitariat commonly and voluntarily submit to overtime. The relationship between time and the produced value of their labor is uncertain and is largely retrospectively defined in terms of the symbolic abstractions of competitive productive activity. In the case of university academics, this means papers published, keynotes delivered, and so on. Berardi (2009) describes

the new forms of alienation for these workers as a kind of purposeful "soullessness." An attendance to the vampiric nature of the contemporary university is in many ways also an attendance to what Berardi identifies as the changing place of the soul within cognitive capitalism. In restructured university workplaces, "the soul" is now part of the production of knowledge work itself, part of the aspirational identity of being an academic and, more broadly, the promotional work of the university. And as such, these industrious acts of soul-making can be outsourced. University managers, academics, and consultants (and vampires) alike are engaged in the elusive search for a soul, albeit through questionable and arbitrary measures of productivity.

In recent decades, universities have become increasingly enthusiastic intensifiers and accelerators of academic work (O'Neill, 2014; Vostal, 2016). One of the ways they have done this is by implementing output metrics, often following the advice of management consultants in doing so (Wilsdon, 2015). Universities are also driven by competitive dynamics in cut-throat markets for research funding and student enrollment. A 2012 report by the US Research Universities Futures Consortium openly admitted:

> Universities have a difficult time objectively assessing their comparative research strengths and weaknesses in relation to their peers on both a program level as well as an institutional basis … The result is that rather than having the ability to conduct objective analysis of their comparative productivity internally, institutions turn to external consultants to provide guidance on strategic planning decisions. Consultants often only have access to public information about other universities, as biased as that might be, but they have the time and experience in evaluating performance between universities. (Research Universities Futures Consortium, 2012, p. 7)

University executives and managers—driven by industry imperatives such as rankings, policy change, and internal Weberian impulses of command and control—also use consultants as hired "goons" or external security staff to corral and discipline their workforces (Graeber, 2018). Consultancies give managers cover to drive through unpopular measures like restructures. They provide pseudoscientific imagery, documentation, and data to conceal the blunter truth of pyramidal power imbalances. Consultancies also contribute handy tactics, such as outsourced teaching workforces or the increasingly indecipherable performance metrics which contribute to sweated academic labor.

For their part, consultants feast on lucrative fees. How lucrative is hard to ascertain. By their very nature, consultancies are opaque, and individual university clients do not always break out the fees they pay in financial reports. Nonetheless, it can be safely assumed that universities are a significant market for both the big four accounting firms (Deloitte, Ernst &

Young, KPMG, and PricewaterhouseCoopers) as well as a host of smaller or "boutique" consultancies that specialize in providing consultancy services to higher education (such as Nous Group, Cubane, HESA, or Wells Advisory). Drawing on university annual reports and compulsory disclosures, a 2023 estimate by Australian journalist Sherryn Groch (2023) was able to total $AUD249 million in payments to consultants by just ten large Australian universities in the 2022 reporting year. Drilling down to an individual institution, mandatory reporting on consultancy spending by Monash University shows that management consultancies have enjoyed generous payments from the university in recent years. In 2021, during the COVID-era contraction, Monash University reported total spending on consultancies of $AUD 13.2 million, with the boutique management consultancy Strategic Project Partners the top vendor, earning more than $AUD2.7 million in the 2021 reporting year. Individual consultancies typically earn fees over multiple years. Over the past six years, Nous has consistently been in the top five consulting firms providing services to Monash University, billing $AUD5.55 million in aggregate (see Table 1). The University of Alberta engaged Nous from 2020 to 2023 to advise on a comprehensive administrative, systems, and operations restructure for approximately $CAD6.5 million.

While the relationship between universities and the consultants they employ is beneficial for the consultants, it is much harder to identify benefits for the host university. Consultants would no doubt argue that their services benefit the university through the implementation of better strategy, higher productivity, and various other new public management measures such as administrative restructures and output metrics. Whether such measures are in the best interests of the university as a public institution is rather more debatable. Clegg et al. (2004) claim that consultants do not improve clients' productivity, that they are in fact in the business of exploiting these consulting contracts and the access to data these contracts

Table 1. Consultancy services to Monash University by The Nous Group, 2016–2021.

Year	Description	Amount ($AUD)	Rank
2016	The Nous Group Management consulting services	1,439,895	3
2017	The Nous Group Management consulting services	1,691,950	3
2018	The Nous Group Management consulting services	415,254	4
2019	Nous Group Pty Ltd Management consulting services	734,185	2
2020	Nous Group Pty Ltd Management consulting services	965,247	2
2021	Nous Group Pty Ltd Management consulting services	305,705	8

Source: Monash University consultants disclosure reporting, "Consultants Disclosure" (2022), https://www.monash.edu/about/governance/consultants-disclosure.

give them in order to produce ready-made "templates" and "toolboxes" that can be marketed to future clients. There is even a view in the literature that the real products of corporate consulting are the reports and visualizations that serve, on the one hand, to legitimate the measures taken by university administrators, and on the other hand, to recruit new clients (Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 1994).

Mazzucato and Collington (2023) argue that consultants exploit market advantages and political networks to capture economic rents from their clients. These rents, they write, "are not necessarily derived from the ownership of scarce valuable knowledge assets, but from the ability to create an impression of value" (p. 3). As many authors have argued, the neoliberal turn in Anglophone university governance has seen a generational shift in self-conceptualisation, from public institution to market actor: the "enterprise university" of Marginson (2000). Consultancies can extract rents in these scenarios because university managements are able and willing to buy their services. In this relationship, the client is not really the university in the broad sense, but rather its top executives, who can see the advantage of consultancies to assist in their directions and prerogatives. But as universities offer their necks to charismatic consultants, what's gone missing is the public value mission—we might even say the soul—of universities.

Consider the financially troubled Canadian University, Laurentian, which has engaged Nous—and, more recently, one of the Big Four consultants, Deloitte–to prepare its Transformation Plan. Deloitte has made abundantly clear its contempt for the notion that universities exist as a public good. In a self-published screed entitled *Higher Education is Evolving*, Deloitte (2013) proposes wholesale changes to university governance in order to support a "different breed of higher education institution," an academic-business hybrid: "Within this new model, higher education institutions increasingly need to generate revenue like any for-profit corporation in the private sector" (p. 1). The wholesale outsourcing that the report proposes (which it shamelessly describes as "diversification")—from campus food services to commercial research funding to the appointment of external university governors—stands to benefit "partnerships" with external consultants, such as Deloitte.

The transaction between universities and consultants, then, is reciprocal, but not equivalent. As with the vampire, through the exchange, universities come to behave more and more like consultancies themselves, becoming knowledge producers for hire (see for example the emphasis on industry-sponsored research), or employment training institutions for late capitalist enterprise (see the emphasis placed on vocational degrees, "micro-credentials," and the measurement of student employability). In our acceptance of this transaction, "we become as him," noted Stoker in *Dracula*; "we

henceforward become foul things of the night like him—without heart or conscience, preying on the bodies and the souls of those we love best" (Stoker, 1897, p. 261).

Once bitten, academics and professional staff alike perpetuate Pavlovian behaviors of contagious consultation. Universities are amok with staff and student surveys, satisfaction polls, feedback forms, and dubiously-sourced social media "alt metrics" (Williams, 2017). Writing about the restructure he oversaw at the University of Alberta, President Bill Flanagan emphasizes the extent of consulting as a step process:

> Staff and faculty participated in hundreds of meetings and workshops, helping yield a clearer picture of which activities occurred where across the vast institution. Members of the university's senior leadership, faculty, staff and student associations – from multiple disciplines, employment groups and campuses – played key roles in designing new work models, guiding decisions, questioning proposals and leading change. Committees – made up of some 119 staff – examined and made recommendations on various aspects of change. (Flanagan, 2023)

At the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), an entire "ideas management" platform, *Crowdicity*, was developed for staff to pitch and "upvote" contributions to the development of the university's strategic plan for the years up to 2027 (Glavin, 2018). Despite such attention to "consultation," staff in the neoliberalised university appear more alienated and disenfranchized than ever. Internally, academic and professional staff are realigned into relationships that emulate commercial models of exchange, in which ticketing systems and "shared services" are deployed to manage the requests of academics-as-clients. As Fleming (2021) points out, this agenda also sees universities impose performance-based directives on their academics under the rubric of "impact" and "engagement." Encouraged or even compelled to write simplistic accounts of their work for social media and the popular media, "academics begin to look like management consultants with an overactive Twitter account" (p. 104).

Not content with providing advice to university managers, consultancies in Australia are also moving aggressively into the provision of curriculum design and teaching itself. At the University of Adelaide, consulting firm Deloitte has partnered with the university to offer paid internships to undergraduate students, in a program known as "The Academy" (University of Adelaide, 2023). The deal is marketed as providing work-integrated learning for students, but the structure of the partnership sees students pay extra fees in addition to their university degree costs; in return Deloitte gains access to its pick of talented students on graduation. Deloitte is also partnering with Swinburne University of Technology, the University of Wollongong and vocational education provider TAFE New South Wales to launch a Cyber Academy, commencing in 2023. The three-year

undergraduate degree is described as "closing Australia's cyber-security skills gap through a unique industry, education and government co-designed program developing the country's smartest, sharpest, job-ready cyber talent" (Deloitte, 2023). Students will enroll at partner education institutions, but the program appears to be delivered by Deloitte.

We are not arguing that consultants lack any knowledge or skill. Consultants do bring knowledge of a certain sort to university managers—an opaque techne, or a kind of corporate occult. Consultants bring skills in offensive and defensive management tactics—how to run a slanted staff consultancy, how to run offense against the staff union, how to conduct the more uncomfortable moments of a redundancy round and minimize risk or exposure. University managers, even in HR, while expert in the day-to-day combat of chancellery politics, aren't necessarily proficient in the finer points of such sanguinary operational maneuvers. As we shall explore below, consultants also offer a type of institutional sleight of hand for ambitious academic restructurers, allowing managers to shift blame to the consultants, and confusing staff as to the ultimate responsibility for unpleasant decisions.

The publicly available reports published by universities in the wake of consultancies are written in ways that do not lend themselves to academic study and verification. Sometimes, the available information is simply pabulum, a few paragraphs of vacuous management jargon peppered with buzzwords like "strategy" and "change." The real consultancy reports—the ones handed to management—are almost never published. In 2020, for instance, consultants Nous, KPMG and Strategic Projects Partners contributed consultancy services to Monash University, which was undergoing a wide-ranging staff restructure. Ultimately, 277 staff were made redundant and there were substantial changes to the structure of some university work areas, including the merger of the theater school with the music school, and a restructure of the library. A forensic audit of the student loads (enrollments) of all the university's courses was undertaken, supposedly to identify which units were no longer sustainable. This audit directly informed the discontinuation of a number of courses and units, including associated redundancy offers to teaching staff. In a verbal briefing to the staff association, the National Tertiary Education Union, Monash University's Vice-Chancellor indicated that these consultancies were informing a "benchmarking process" to identify potential cost savings. But the consultancy report or reports that underlay this change process were never made available to Monash University staff, despite repeated requests by the union. The reason for withholding them, the union was told, was that they were "commercial in confidence"—that is, confidential by virtue of the university's contract with its consultants. Such contractual

arrangements are common methods by which public sector organizations can avoid transparency in their outsourcing arrangements (Barton, 2006).

Likewise, the president of the union representing University of Alberta faculty (AASUA) noted:

> The roadmap for the restructure, we were informed, would be provided by NOUS. The model would be the University of Sydney in Australia, the restructuring of which was also handled by NOUS. Neither the AASUA nor the non-academic staff association were allowed participation on the working groups, and we were refused access to any of the advice, benchmark data, or financial information that formed the basis of the plans and financial projections. (Ricardo Acuña, quoted in Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), 2021)

Interestingly, however, such confidentiality considerations do not appear to apply symmetrically to the consultants. A report by Nous prepared for the University of Alberta in the run-up to their recent restructure draws freely on information gathered by the consultants at other universities in Australia and the United Kingdom—including from Monash University. The University of Alberta report by Nous openly admits that it compares former clients of the consultancy: "Nous took a sample of 17 institutions, many of whom Nous has had a relationship with during or following a major transformation, to explore regional and institutional differences" (University of Alberta, 2020, p. 4).

Needless to say, such modes of data production and reporting do not meet academic standards. By definition, academic reports and articles are *published*, which is to say they may be read by anyone with access to the relevant journal. Further, academics employed by universities generally publish their scholarly research only after a process of peer review, in which evidence sources are made available for examination. Ironically, the very consultants who advise university managers on such matters as research performance or faculty staffing levels are not subject to anything like the levels of rigor or scrutiny demanded of the academics who may end up losing their jobs because of unreviewed and unpublished consultancy advice. Unlike academics, consulting firms are not held to the same standards of accountability for errors of judgment or fact. University clients repeatedly reengage the same consultants, despite an absence of transparent analysis of their previous engagements, in an effect that has been called "demand inflation" in the British public sector (Sturdy et al., 2022). Yet although the evident economic transactions between universities and consultancies are shrouded by claims of commercial confidentiality, and whilst their work is frequently done in the shadows, hidden away from longstanding faculty governance processes and obscured to the vast majority of the people whom their work will affect, the engagement of consultants by universities is widely touted as a type of "solutions theater" (Clark

& Salaman, 1998), in which a select group of firms are undeniably brandished.

Down for the count: Performance-based funding and metrics

> You know that I am called the Count
> Because I really love to count
> Sometimes I sit and count all day,
> But sometimes I get carried away
> –"The Song of the Count" *(Sesame Street)*

Karl Marx, writing of the monstrous nature of capitalism and citing Engels, identified it as "the vampire" that "will not let go while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited" (Marx, 1976, p. 416). For Marx, the critical act of seeing and naming capitalism as horrific was itself a revolutionary act (McNally, 2011). Given the often-covert nature of consultancy involvement in the university sector as described above, simple acts of unveiling might seem like an adequate intervention. But that would fail to account for the fact that the relationship between consultants and university managements is not exactly the vampirism that Marx observed in 19th century capitalism: after all, both consultants and university managers collaborate to extract surplus labor from university workforces. Nevertheless, we can observe a type of parasitism or infectious transmission, in which consultants, often consciously facilitated by university managers, infect and then predate on the university body.

How, then, do consultants infect their hosts? In one sense the dependence of universities on management consultants, particularly during purported periods of disruption creates a culture of learned helplessness, a leaching of capability that simultaneously devalues internal expertise where it exists. Outsourcing organizational advice contributes to the ongoing underdevelopment of managerial skills which then must be persistently subcontracted. Consulting companies such as Nous and their affiliate Cubane are founded and populated by university graduates and ex-employees, who then sell their skills back into the organizations they have departed. And they set about fashioning them in their own image.

It doesn't need to be this way, as noted by University of Alberta academics, David Kahane and Lynette Shultz. They offered the university unheeded advice on how to better pursue and take advice in an op ed in the *Edmonton Journal*:

> Slow down the process—the overall timeline if possible and certainly the time allowed for deliberation within particular gatherings. Give faculty and staff unions a seat at the table. Release the data informing decisions. Drop shallow town halls and overreliance on the *Thought Exchange* platform and instead draw on the wealth of genuinely deliberative engagement methods that have been proven over decades and

that are studied and validated by researchers of public engagement. (Kahane & Schultz, 2020)

For Kahane and Schultz (2020), performative internal "consultation" is operationalized specifically and intentionally to shield university elites from inconvenient truths.

The "vampire" to be resisted in the mid-20th century university was the contagious spread of massification against traditional hierarchies of social reproduction. Universities were bastions of defence for a narrow social elite. Vampirism in the early 21st-century university is an altogether different horror. This is the mutual mastication between consultants and a swelling elite class of executive managers within institutions, sometimes drawn from faculty (typically from disciplines such as STEM, Business, or Law), sometimes with solely managerial resumes. These managers are accountable to different key performance indicators than the academics they oversee, and they are disproportionately rewarded with grossly inflated salaries and cash performance bonuses not available to ordinary academics. Sometimes the creation of this class seems to be the end-point of academic restructuring, such as the controversial fabrication of Executive Deans at the University of Alberta, described in Sale's essay in this special issue). This is the internalization of rankings and hierarchies as part of the functioning of the university itself, in which management leaches discretion from an increasingly precarious class of working academics.

Rankings are increasingly central to student choice in the fiercely competitive quasi-market of university student enrollments (Pusser & Marginson, 2013). Competition is two-sided, in that students compete to study at the "best" institutions (generally thought to be the oldest, most prestigious or highest ranked universities), while universities in turn compete for the best students. A typical exercise in organizational change would endeavor to "goose" a given faculty or university's ranking, by means of a quick restructure or research reorganization. The tactics for manipulating rankings are reasonably well known and are only partially discouraged by tweaks to international rankings systems. The fastest, but most expensive, tactic involves buying in high profile researchers, whose weight of publications and citations can rapidly increase the aggregate performance of a particular faculty or school. As rankings are often based on ratios, it can also help to artificially increase or reduce the numerator or divisor, for instance by excluding low-performing staff from research calculations by relabeling them as administrators or back-office staff. Alvesson (2013) reports his personal experience where "one business school prepared for a ranking based on an assessment of the research performed by removing some low-performing faculty from the website and temporarily moving

others to units where their low research output was expected to do least harm" (p. 103).

When faculty-student ratios matter in quality judgments, students can be subtracted from the equation, for instance by excluding an overseas campus as a "subsidiary" of the mothership university. In their detailed ethnography of US law school rankings, Espeland and Sauder (2016) write:

> Some [law schools] changed hiring strategies to improve faculty-student ratios. A faculty member at a top-fifty school told us that his dean "actually very strategically looks at his faculty-student ratio for ranking purposes. If he can get two junior faculty for the cost of one senior faculty, he may pursue the juniors in order to lower the faculty/student ratio." Some schools reallocate money in order to increase their "expenditure per student" numbers, while others employ consultants to help them manage rankings more effectively. A number of deans now discourage fall sabbaticals since fall is when faculty members are counted for USN [*US News* ranking] purposes. (p. 99)

Various more obscure manipulations in the way metrics are reported to rankings agencies are also possible, including systemic Google Scholar fraud (López-Cózar et al., 2014). Because many rankings metrics are driven at least partially by reputation, marketing becomes an overriding priority. Espeland and Sauder (2016) describe the massive expenditure by US law schools on marketing campaigns to influence the *US News* rankings surveys–perversely, even at the cost of teaching and scholarship. At an institutional level, Oravec (2017) describes "a neoliberal concern with the surface appearance of academic participation [in scholarly publication] rather than with the more complex nuances of intellectual exchange, which are substantially more difficult to characterize" (p. 427). Management consultants can help university managers with all of these adventures.

Some breadcrumbs can be followed into the forest. In the case of Nous, the consultancy has highlighted one of its recent projects at Monash University on its company website. The web page is worth quoting at length, as it demonstrates the finer grains of what the consultancy purports to deliver in higher education consultancies.

We modeled opportunities and developed a roadmap for action:

Phase 1: Sizing the opportunity for student growth and space optimisation:

- Conducted market sizing analysis to understand demand and performance.
- Created a detailed model mapping the impact of growth opportunities on overall student load.
- Developed a capacity model to project space requirements by campus for different load scenarios.

Phase 2: Developing the implementation roadmap:

- Developed faculty-level roadmap outlining changes required to course offer [sic] and student experience to support growth.
- Developed channel roadmap for target markets including a review of existing channels and competitor analysis.
- Recommended process optimisations for course development, pricing and load planning to support target growth and diversification.
- Identified and planned space optimisations including improvement to timetabling, flexible teaching hours and supporting more blended learning.
- Conducted analysis to support 10 year capital plan to meet projected load growth.

At first glance, phrases such as "market sizing analysis" and "process optimisations for course development" sound anodyne and inoffensive. But look closer, and the description of the project shows a reach deep into the entrails of the university's operations, including course fees, student loads, enrollments, physical infrastructure, and staff workloads. The university's industrial relations policies are canvased via the rather telling phrase "flexible teaching hours," and the document even expresses a view on classroom pedagogy itself, via "supporting more blended learning." Importantly, this is a consultation intervention taking place at upper levels, for those senior managers with purview above faculty levels (each faculty, we note, gets their own tailored "roadmap"). In other words, this is not just a report on various ideas for university strategy and direction; it is a considered and far-reaching intervention into the workings of teaching and research.

Arguably as important as the marshaling of organizational change is the intellectual fig leaf that engaging a consultancy provides for institutional management or governments. In late capitalism, consultancies enjoy considerable soft power resources. The "big four" accounting firms, aka "the coalition of the billing," and their companions, large management consultancies, can be said to occupy the commanding heights of the neoliberal economy: in 2021, the big four conducted 189 of the audits of the top 200 Australian public companies listed in the ASX200, and raked in 70% of the aggregate revenue of the 100 largest accounting firms in Australia (Wootton, 2022). A recent Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) report found that in the 2020–2021 financial year alone, the Australian public service provided full-time work for almost 54,000 consultants (37% of the actual workforce) at a cost of some $21 billion dollars (Convery, 2023; Government of Australia, 2023). In this reckoning of contemporary workplaces, consultants constitute a kind of shadow workforce.

The big consultancies devote considerable effort to burnishing their positional advantage and soft power. They conduct research of their own and publish reports and papers. They attend conferences and build deep personal networks with the power elites of the university industrial complex. These networks can extend beyond specific consultancy contracts, to retainer relationships as on-call advisorships, membership by prominent partners on university governing councils, and employment of former consultants in the top tiers of university management hierarchies. Australian chancellors—effectively chairpersons of Australian university boards—are overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of big business. The cross-directorships across the key boards of Australian banks and listed corporations of the University of Sydney's Chancellor, Belinda Hutchinson (Thales), Monash University's Simon McKeon (Macquarie Bank and Rio Tinto), Western Sydney University's Jennifer Westacott (Business Council of Australia), the University of Technology Sydney's Catherine Livingstone (Commonwealth Bank), and the University of New South Wales' Chancellor, David Gonski, for example, are too numerous to detail. The power elite of Australian corporate directorships reflects a welcoming environment for lucrative university consultancies, perhaps best exemplified by the $25 million consultancy spend with PwC by the University of New South Wales in 2017 (Campion, 2017). Ensconced in the plush foyers of corporate power, Australian university managers find the engagement of consultants not merely helpful, but convivial. Favored consultants are, after all, very often friends of the directors of their boards. Research on the boards of governors of Alberta universities and colleges has found a similar pattern of interlocking corporate networks (Adkin et al., 2022). Of the twelve government-appointed "public" members on the University of Alberta Board of Governors, all are connected to the financial (4), legal (1), consulting (2), and the construction, energy and natural resources (5) sectors, and the Board enjoys several additional appointments of employees of the Big Four consulting firms (KPMG, PwC, EY and Deloitte).

Executive teeth

> De Babylon system is the vampire, falling empire, Suckin' the blood of the sufferers, Building church and university, Deceiving the people continually. Bob Marley, *Babylon System* (1979)

Consultants flourish in a public sector that fetishizes the corporate world and its management fads and fashions (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Since at least the 1980s, Anglophone universities, particularly, have adopted philosophies and policies of management that can be classified under the rubric of "new public management."

New Public Management (NPM) has attracted an extensive literature, reflecting its complex history and differing implementation and influence in different jurisdictions and administrative fields. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a number of common themes. Hood's (1991) seminal article, for instance, lists seven key doctrines of NPM to which "a 'typical' public sector policy delivery unit in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and many other OECD countries" would have been exposed. Hood placed "hands-on professional management" at the top of his list, followed by "explicit standards and measures of performance," "greater emphasis on output controls," "disaggregation of units," "greater competition" in the public sector, "stress on private-sector styles of management practice," and, last but not least, "greater discipline and parsimony in resource use" (i.e., cost-cutting). Many later sources agree that efforts at administrative reform drawing on new public management stress a coherent and identifiable set of ideas, including: the making of new markets (or quasi-markets) within public service provision (Walsh, 1995); performance measurement, including the enthusiastic adoption of performance and output metrics; top-down managerialism, vesting more power in senior executives, often justified with reference to corporate models (Hall, 2013; Ward, 2011); and cost-cutting, often accompanied by partial privatization, public-private partnerships, or outsourcing (Hyndman & Lapsley, 2016; Poole et al., 2021).

Universities, particularly in European and Anglophone countries, have proved highly susceptible to the siren song of New Public Management (De Boer et al., 2007; Lorenz, 2012; Tolofari, 2005). Universities are exceptionally diverse institutions and it would be foolish to speak in unitary or singular terms of "the university"; nevertheless, there is no doubt that the pervasive influence of neoliberalism and new public management has led to significant changes in the ways in which universities are managed and governed, particularly in the UK, US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and in some nation-states of Europe, such as the Netherlands. Recent observers have repeatedly cited the influence of new public management on the pathologies of the contemporary university. In a crisp summary of new public management in universities, Bleiklie (2018) writes that "the corporate enterprise ideal is in many ways an integral part of the NPM movement." Lorenz (2012) mounts a convincing argument for the intellectual consequences of new public management in the post-millennial enthusiasm by university managements for performance measurement, audit cultures, and quantitative output controls. NPM initiatives in universities, he writes, "are characterized by a combination of free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control practices" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 600). Fleming (2021) points out that the "emulation of [for-profit] corporations by publicly funded

universities would seem like an oxymoron if wasn't for the discourse of New Public Management" (p. 146).

Mid-20th century public institutions, including universities, were in many ways more hidebound and rigid than their millennial successors. Long-held traditions of collegiality vested considerable power in academic hierarchies, which were (and often remain) dominated by upper-class white men. Few contemporary academics would openly embrace the campus life of Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954). Universities were also much smaller, educating just a fortunate few, generally privileged high-school leavers. Post-1960s massification entailed much larger higher education systems, and the concomitant need for better coordination and management of these sprawling institutions (Trow, 1973). But the turn to new public management in the 1980s and 1990s created a new type of institution in which managers proliferated and managerialism was celebrated (Deem, 1998). The post-millennial university is no longer dominated by academic cliques, but rather controlled and commanded by an elite class of very highly paid academic managers, presiding over a pyramid of increasingly insecure and poorly paid temporary and precarious teachers and researchers. All the while, a new class of administrators has sprung up, as the gusts and gales of competition encourage universities to add new staffs of social marketers, brand polishers and student experience engineers (Watts, 2017). Old-fashioned concerns about pedagogy or academic excellence are pushed aside by more urgent worries about the next rankings exercise, or the next international student expo. As Lorenz (2012) notes, management consultants are well positioned to provide advice to top managers in this theater of crisis solutions.

Conclusion: Giving up the ghost?

Universities and management consultants are locked in a *danse macabre*. As Marx observed, "the appropriation of labor by capital confronts the worker in a coarsely sensuous form; capital absorbs labor into itself – 'as though its body were by love possessed'" (1976, p. 704). Through the figure of the vampire, we propose a view of consultants that differs from the belief that they (like zombies) carry "the burden of otherness" (Kipping & Armbrüster, 2002). Instead, we see consultants as partners in a relationship of mutually dependent intimacy and harm.

University managers find consultants seductive. A generation of new public management has fostered deep insecurity within university hierarchies about the public value of education. In the massified and corporatised post-millennial university, the consultant offers a tantalizing glimpse of the corporate ideal that university executives long for. As Veblen observed a

century ago, "what is had in mind in this insistence on an efficient system is that these corporations of learning shall set their affairs in order after the pattern of a well-conducted business concern" (Veblen, 1918, p. 85). Consultants encourage and prey on these (y)earnings. Apart from their lucrative fees, consultants enjoy the prestige of rearranging and re-engineering "corporations of knowledge," in ways that both gratify the neoliberal imaginary and ensure their own ongoing employment.

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