BRAIN
EDITORIAL

On the responsibilities of intellectuals and the rise of bullshit jobs in universities

You may never have considered yourself to be one. Why would you? But if you're reading this, there is more than a likelihood that you are one. If you're a person who takes time to reflect upon the state of the world, consider, perhaps question or even conduct research, then there can be no doubt. You are an intellectual. With that mantle though comes an important obligation, one that Noam Chomsky termed the responsibility of intellectuals. His essay on the topic published in 1967 was directed specifically at one issue: America's war in Vietnam.[1] However, years later when I heard him speak in a crowded lecture theatre at MIT on a very different subject, the wider meaning of that phrase—and responsibility—became clear.

As Chomsky put it, intellectuals are in the privileged position to expose lies and to analyse actions according to their (often hidden) motives and intentions. They have the training—or at least some of them do—to seek the truth, which might well be concealed behind a veil of distortion and misrepresentation. In our everyday academic lives, we might not consider that we have a sufficiently noble cause to pursue with such rigour, but perhaps we do. Sometimes, the truth actually lies in plain sight. Its just that we don't see it for what it is.

For some years now, it has become increasingly apparent to me that we are sleepwalking into a disaster. We are losing sight of the academic mission: to think, to enquire, to design and perform new research, to innovate, to teach and communicate our findings for the purpose of societal improvement. There are many reasons why this has occurred over just a quarter of century but a key contributor has been the corporatization of academic institutions.[2] In principle, there is nothing wrong with making universities strong businesses, incorporating within them systems that make them financially secure and endowing them with strong governance. However, a key problem has been that instead of facilitating academic work, these systems have created obstacles to performing the core mission. Corporate academia is subverting academic life. It's destroying academia from within.

The reason is simple. To undertake corporatization, universities have borrowed principles that they think work in the private sector. These involve creating layers of administration to run different sectors of our institutions. In the UK, for example, between 1995 and 2019 while spending on university departments roughly doubled, the amount allocated to administration and central services more than quadrupled.[3] But it doesn't stop there.

Administrations have also felt it necessary to outsource work to companies outside of universities. These range all the way from IT systems and platforms (for grant applications, human resources, purchase orders, reimbursements, examination marking and many others), through to legal contracts, travel agencies, security, catering and cleaning firms. All of these come at a cost. A recent enquiry I made to my own university revealed, quite shockingly, that last year the University of Oxford gave £3m of the £15m we spent on travel to the travel agency we had contracted with. Although this sum raises many questions and concerns about why such a policy is being pursued (I'll return to that later), it is an underestimate of the real cost. The expense is far greater than £3m.

For costs are not only direct financial ones incurred by hiring third parties. There are also indirect (and hidden) costs when judging whether a new resource is 'value for money'. Let's consider travel. From the point of view of administrators and policy makers it 'makes strategic sense' to have oversight of where employees are travelling and to obtain better travel deals for the institution through economies of scale. Of course, there will be tendering and consideration of deals offered by different travel agencies, and one will be selected based on its competitiveness *compared to other such businesses*. However, it turns out that travel agencies charge far more than it would cost an academic to arrange their own travel and accommodation—sometimes staggeringly more. But this isn't all. Once a company and its system is installed, the complexities unravel and it becomes clear why universities have had to employ more people to deal with these.

To obtain prior approval for travel now requires involvement of tiers of university administration (to raise purchase orders and simply to approve the purchase) as well as a round of several emails and online form filling. This all takes time—additional time of administrators and that of academics. So it is not just £3m that the University of Oxford gave away to its travel agency of choice. It also incurred a cost of the extra time spent by its staff, when both administrators and academics could have been doing something far more useful for the core mission of the university. Consider the financial implications of this at scale in an organization the size of a large university. How much does it really cost if we were to put a price tag on the hours lost making travel arrangements this way? The answer is that we don't know because this is never costed when universities decide to make such strategic 'value for money' initiatives. Ultimately though travel and other unnecessary costs that come with many of the third party contracts that universities are engaged in are paid for by the organizations that fund our research (including charities and governmental bodies) and via student fees.

So the real comparison when contracting to a third party should be with what if we just left things as they are and *not* contract out to

any one at all. Why waste far more than £3m of a university's money when academics can book travel themselves more cheaply, and within a few minutes? If contracts like this were the policy of a small, developing nation, some people might wonder which gangster was pocketing the profits. But there need not be anything so malevolent going on here. Initiatives such as this are the creation of an administrative cadre that means well, but doesn't really appreciate what academics do, and the value of their (lost) time.

It isn't just universities which have gone down this track. Even our funders have succumbed to the contagious madness. They too have created their own analogous systems (for travel and everything else). They have also made audit demands on universities which have, in turn, led to more administratively onerous initiatives being adopted by academic institutions. The fact that these processes effectively mean that there is less time to do the work that we are really here to do—and that a funder is investing in us to perform—is never discussed.

Initiatives like this are plainly bonkers. Why have they happened? The late David Graeber, anthropologist and unflinching observer of humankind, argued that modern Western societies have developed classes of work that have no value. In his book *Bullshit Jobs: The Rise of Pointless Work and What We Can Do About it*,[4] Graeber considers why there are so many people employed to perform unnecessary work. These include individuals whose primary function may even be to find unnecessary jobs for other people. One of his very telling examples is Chloe. She held the post of Academic Dean at a prominent UK University. Her responsibility, she said, had been to provide 'strategic leadership'. But Chloe really had no power or budget. Instead, like many non-executive Deans or Pro-Vice Chancellors she had to make up work—also known as strategic or bullshit initiatives—for herself and the small empire of administrative staff allocated to her.

Chloe had the good sense to realize that hers was in fact a bullshit job. It did nothing useful. She did nothing useful. I'm sure that many of us know people occupying similar jobs, who revel in prancing around their university and beyond, proud of spending institutional money on business class flights around the world, in thrall to themselves, and oblivious to the fact that they actually have a bullshit job. I am waiting for the day when they come up with the super strategic initiative of outsourcing the academic work of their university to a third party. It might sound shocking but taken to some people's logical conclusions, this might not be such a fantasy.

With staff now complaining of burnout and stress because, I would argue, of the multitude of administrative demands upon them, university leaders are having to come up with new initiatives to improve wellbeing. If there were no staff, there would be no need to deal with burnout!

Amusing asides apart, the responsibilities of intellectuals lie in pointing out the disastrous course we seem to have set ourselves on since the beginning of the millennium. In a very short time, we have created not only silly systems of governance and regulation, but are also manging to subvert academic life through the creation of bullshit jobs and, I would argue, bullshit practices. Each of the administrative burdens that we are confronted with on a daily basis might seem small on their own but cumulatively they amount to a 'mountain of small things' that is killing academia.[5]

Was research, teaching and innovation really performed worse previously when we didn't have so many administrative burdens? Have we become more or less efficient at doing what we are really supposed to do—our core mission—in modern universities? Are we creating burnout and need for wellbeing in staff simply because of the new bullshit tasks we impose upon them. I'll let you answer these questions and end simply by saying that we don't have to accept all this. We can use our training and skills—the abilities we have honed over years—to direct our critical thinking inwards and consider how we can push back on the calamitous corporatization of our universities. It is a fundamental responsibility of intellectuals.

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References

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