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To all new academics, value your research

TOBY MILLER THE AUSTRALIAN **APRIL 6, 2016 12:00AM**

I'm a mentor, albeit reluctantly. I'd rather be youthful and insurgent than aged and dependable.

But the term describes part of the work I do today as a professor in Australia, Colombia and Britain, after 20 years in New York and Los Angeles.

A key component is supporting new faculty, who are saddled in this parish, as in Britain, with the ghastly moniker of early career researchers — a badge of obedience if ever there were one.

Although the three countries differ significantly, they are all prone to the commodification and governmentalisation of knowledge.

I'll focus here on Australia.

Beginning with the 1890 world depression, a critique of Australian education has routinely emerged at times of economic decline. During fiscal crises, governments attack teachers and researchers for neither preparing students for social and technological change, nor meeting the needs of capital for innovation.

The Australian state is forever urging universities to serve business through applied knowledge, because easy profits from property, finance and minerals have left corporations lazy when it comes to research and development.

The national innovation strategy is the latest iteration of this response to capital's failures.

That's the commodification of knowledge.

And governmentalisation?

Australia inherited the fruits of struggles for scholarly freedom from domination by church and state that were waged over centuries across western Europe and the US. That relative autonomy accrued further under Menzies, Whitlam and even Fraser.

But in accordance with the nation's repeated latter-day cycles of boom and bust, it has diminished. As we have seen, one result is commodified knowledge.

The other is administrative control.

Hence my use of Roland Barthes's ugly neologism "governmentality" (popularised by Michel Foucault) to describe the infestation of everyday academic life by state priorities.

What does this imply for early career researchers?

They are caught in a triple pincer movement, subjected to the scientific management of teaching, research, and relevance.

They are supposed to be superb in the classroom thanks to Power(less) Point(less) — regardless of studies that question the pedagogic value of such software.

They are meant to publish in a select group of journals, virtually all in English and based in two countries. That might be appropriate for the sciences, where English is the coin of the realm, but it's far-fetched in the humanities and social sciences, where it's not.

Latin American colleagues, for example, are undervalued for writing in excellent Spanish-language journals versus the ordinary science of many Anglo outlets, which are often hidebound by the geopolitical and methodological imaginary of Britain and the US.

At the same time as meeting these requirements of alleged academic excellence, new faculty are expected to articulate their research to a magical entity called industry, which seems to refer to corporations and civil society.

What is the record of scholarship tied to industry? Consider medicine. It has been estimated that one in 10 papers in leading medical outlets are the work of education and communications companies. Funded by pharmaceutical corporations, these scholarly ghostwriters pay academics to sign manuscripts. Then pharmacorps pressure medical journals to print the inevitably favourable findings, in return for advertising.

That's a telling outcome of scholarship intimately linked with industry. So where does this leave colleagues who are subject to these manifold imperatives? What is their best way forward?

I recommend they bear three factors in mind.

The first is the instructions of their employers. These may change: many senior managers, intent on embellishing their next job applications, quixotically

transform scholarly priorities, rewards and organisations. So committing to ephemeral policies that pass as perennial, whether on campus or in Canberra, is unwise — but kicking against them is risky. One needs to meet the mandated norms of the day without assuming they will apply in the future.

The second factor is satisfying one's international peers, in terms of the knowledge they use and the outlets they privilege. As we saw above, the disadvantage lies in the compromised Anglo nature of much conventional publishing.

The third — and most reliable — measure is one's own desire. Why did you get into this game in the first place? Was it to satisfy a Canberracrat boasting a 1985 pass degree in neoclassical economics, or an under-published vice-chancellor who's just passing through?

Probably not. It was probably because you were committed to inquiry, writing and teaching.

So my recipe for surviving and thriving has three ingredients: do what your bosses prescribe, but don't assume it will be consistent or long-lasting; do what your peers do, without falling into an Anglo-only world; and do what you want to do.

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