

The Rise of the Desk Clerk Academic

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It is a particularly quotidian breed in the modern, management-driven university. The desk clerk who pretends to be an academic and researcher but is neither. The desk clerk who admires rosters, work plans and "key performance indicators", thinking that the process of knowledge is quantifiable by productivity targets and financial returns. The desk clerk who pilfers the work of undergraduates, sports a dubious doctoral thesis, and who rarely sets foot within the sacred surrounds of a library.

The rise of such a figure in the global university scene, one neither fish nor fowl, is no accident. As universities have declined, bureaucracy has bubbled with furious enthusiasm. The decline of teaching and its quality is complemented by the rise of the paranoid penpusher and spreadsheet artist. With a decline in substantive learning, the emergence of soft, watered-down syllabi, diminished reading lists (how dare one expect students to read one book a subject, let alone a few journal articles?), an increased focus on entertainment (flickering videos, please), the desk clerk has become sovereign, dominant, and terrifying. Shallow, weak, insipid, such beings occupy a particular space of decline, subsided by the toilers who put in the hours in often shoddy conditions. For the casual or sessional workforce, this is particularly acute.

Importantly, the desk clerk cadres perform the role of keeping actual academics with unhealthily industrious standards in check, acting as a sinister Varangian Guard for the broader management of the universities. They monitor staff emails without warning, undermine privacy with habitual criminality, conduct surveillance with pathological tendency. They straitjacket thought, curtail originality, quash dissent. To assist them in their mission is a vicious set of regulations known as the "Code of Conduct", a document that would be neatly slotted into any KGB manual on thought control. Good to be on your best behaviour: the Desk Clerk is keeping an eye on you. Be a team member. Don't question university policy, however criminal or moronic. If not, to the cooler, a disciplinary hearing devoid of natural justice precepts.

So, where do we find these crawling creatures so menacing to learning and murderous to

thought? In the position of Deans, associate deans and their collaborating adjutants. Program managers on the make. Colourless gauleiters, humourless henchmen, women and those in between hoping to make a buck or two out of the neuroses of identity politics. (Fancy an aboriginal cause we can advance?) In the role of directors of learning and teaching. (Universities are in a bad way if they need such areas.) In sections with names resembling toilet cleaning products or carcinogenic chemicals.

These people are, in turn, given orders by nameless, unaccountable individuals in the upper echelons of the institution, crowned by that most unaccountable of officers, the Vice-chancellor. Usual corporate and commercial laws do not apply, be there in terms of remuneration or governance decisions. This is particularly the case in Australia's universities, where the average salary for the VC hovers around A\$1 million. Despite being treated as corporate institutions, such universities are not controlled by the same disclosure requirements that companies must follow. The results are predictable enough: the sloshing and moving of dark money, the prevalence of shady deals, and poor, even bankrupting decisions.

The desk clerk's orders, often crafted on a ghastly template, are followed without question, delivered at meetings held with academics who should know better. (An academic who has time for meetings is obviously not pulling any weight.) It is one of the greatest conflicts of interest in the academy: the associate dean, having a chat with staff in a discipline meeting ostensibly to address a critical issue of merit. Given that the associate dean in question is not beholden to staff welfare but the unelected officialdom of a mini-police state, the spectacle is not merely farcical but scandalous.

Debate is supposedly held, discussion conducted. Academic staff babble, gossip and chat in convivial surroundings pretending to follow a serious agenda. But these meetings only ever serve to rubberstamp the bleak reality that is hatched in the University Chancellery, where thought is purposely killed in favour of middle-management speak, corrupt goals, and self-feathering. For desk clerks keen to rise up the greasy pole, it's best to be obedient and steely in resolve, kick down against the opposition, and suppress the contrarians. Never mind that students are ignored, a toxic workplace rife with bullying neglected, or that the university is becoming increasingly irrelevant.

The favourite occasion of the year for the desk clerk is the announcement of the promotions round. Bootlickers and coprophagic devotees delight in the news that they have gained an associate professorship or even professorship, despite having not authored work of note - or any work for that matter. The time has surely come to strip such individuals of academic positions and admit them to the role of administrators, with salaries adjusted downwards. Because that is what a desk clerk, after all, is.

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