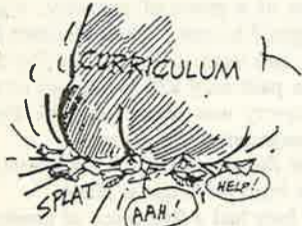


What's happenin' elsewhere

Cross-campus news

NATIONAL DAY OF ACTION - AUSTUDY

Most university campuses around the country organised demonstrations to protest against the inadequacies of the Austudy scheme. UNE-Armidale seems to be one of the few campuses which did not do this at all, but then we do have many more pressing issues on our minds.



Sagacity (UWS Nepean)

Somehow they managed to interview their Vice-Chancellor. His response to the question 'Is the clever country notion a myth?' was '...what it is trying to get across was the notion that there would not be a future for Australia if all we are relying on is growing things and digging them out of the ground....We've got to use our brains better than we have so far.'

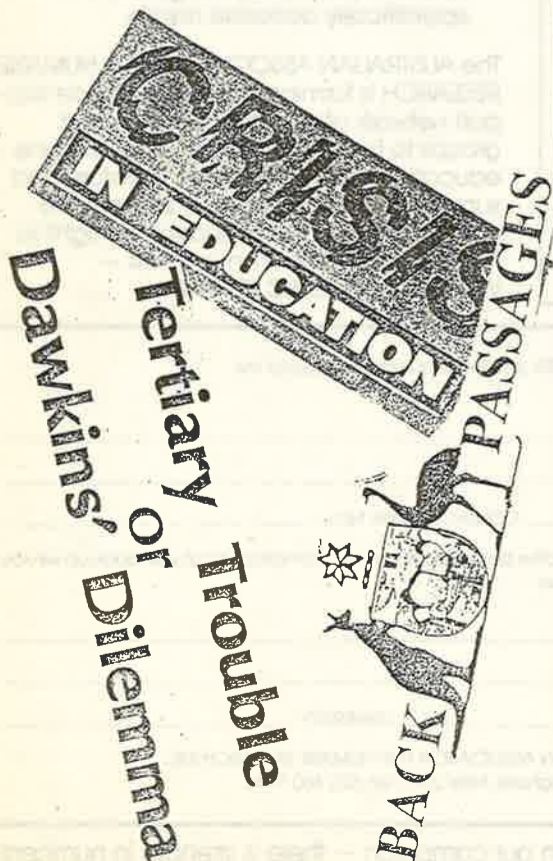
Berzerk (Macarthur)

It appears that Macarthur students have a 'non student, student gym'. The student writing about this said that students should be able to use the equipment whenever it is free, and (with regard to basketball courts) shouldn't have to book them if there is no one using them.

Fandango (Box Hill TAFE)

This paper has included a very interesting section called "Course Confessions" which consists of students' opinions of their courses and the teaching staff involved in them. Quite a good idea!!

HEADLINES FROM AROUND AUSTRALIA



KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

IN ACADEMIA

Brian Martin
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Why have there been such bitter battles over political economy at the University of Sydney and over law at Macquarie University? Why have women's studies and peace studies been so controversial? Why was Professor Sydney Orr dismissed from the University of Tasmania? Why was there an attempt to dismiss Professor Clyde Maxwell from the University of Adelaide? Each of these cases illustrates the connection between knowledge and power in academia.

Higher education is, of course, supposed to be about knowledge. Research is the creation and testing of knowledge claims. Teaching and learning are concerned with the transmission of knowledge. But none of this happens in a vacuum. Other factors are always involved in dealings with knowledge.

To get at these factors, it is useful to ask whose interests are served by academic research. The knowledge produced by academics is most useful to three kinds of groups: corporations, governments, and professions. A large fraction of the technical investigations done in departments of science, engineering, commerce, and agriculture are valuable to corporations and governments. The professions of law and medicine are served by relevant professional faculties. Last of all, the academic profession itself is the main beneficiary of much academic activity.

In this article I focus on research, leaving for another occasion the vital related issue of teaching, credentials, and the reproduction of privilege.

How does it happen that academic research serves some groups in society more than others? To begin, it is important to recognise the complexity of the academic community, which is splintered by internal hierarchies, disciplinary boundaries, bureaucratic and professional sources of status and advancement, diverse sources of external funding and legitimacy, and the familiar categories of gender, ethnicity, and age. Academia, in a distorted way, reflects a wide range of power structures and perspectives in the wider society. Academia's enormous diversity, in the context of limited funding and the inherently scarce resource of status, provides a fertile ground for conflict: conflict between different disciplines, between different paradigms, and between different personalities.

In outline, the academic research system can be looked at in the following way. There are many groups in the wider society with an interest in particular types of knowledge, both for practical use (such as chemistry) and for ideological use (such as political science). Most of higher education is funded by the government, and all of it is regulated by the government, through licensing of institutions and degrees etc. Politicians and bureaucrats provide a focus for the diverse pressures on higher education.

The result is that powerful corporations and professions get much of what they want: engineering and law faculties, for example. Parents get a chance for their children to obtain degrees and an inside track to a better job. But other groups push in to have a say, too. For example, with the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s, higher education came under pressure to launch research and teaching into environmental issues. Similar processes led to women's studies and peace studies.

Pressure from the outside for certain kinds of teaching and research always has to be filtered through academic power structures. Academics are not passive pawns. They have their own interests to look after: jobs, status, conditions. The basic system which has developed to serve academic interests is knowledge specialisation. Knowledge is divided first of all into disciplines, which are supposed to be coherent bodies of theory for explaining parts of the world: physics, psychology, philosophy. Academics protect their territory by becoming disciplinary specialists: those from other disciplines are excluded from making decisions within the

discipline. Some disciplines are well suited for serving particular outside groups, such as chemical engineering for the chemical industry. But the discipline also helps to keep outsiders from exercising too much direct control.

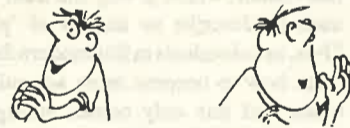
Within disciplines, academics specialise further, learning more and more about less and less. Often there are only ten or twenty people in the world who can understand (or care about) the research done by a particular academic. This super-specialisation helps protect academics from outside control, and also from competition from other academics or non-academics. Specialists in protein synthesis or seventeenth-century Italian literature typically claim that only their peers are capable of judging the quality of their work.

Usually research and teaching are carried out without too much fuss. Research papers are written which are professionally useful to academics themselves, sometimes useful to powerful outside groups (who have the expertise to understand and the money to apply the research), and very seldom to anyone else. Students graduate to obtain jobs in the usual range of careers. Amidst all this, it is easy to be oblivious to the role of power structures in influencing the creation and transmission of knowledge.

Occasionally, though, this routine is disrupted. The struggle over knowledge becomes public. The normal exercise of power suddenly becomes much more visible. There have been a number of prominent public struggles involving Australian higher education in the past several decades. In the usual accounts of these cases, most of the attention has been on the alleged rights and wrongs of particular personalities or organisations. What this focus misses is the underlying power dynamics. Here I will briefly explore the implications of a few of these struggles in terms of higher education as a power-knowledge system.



KNOWLEDGE



KNOWLEDGE



KNOWLEDGE



POWER!

The Macquarie University Law School. The law, like every other area of society, has been the focus for social struggles. The dominant use of the law is to protect established powerful groups: governments, large corporations, middle and upper-class individuals, people. The law is effective in serving the powerful precisely because it is presented and often perceived as neutral. The law protects the property of the poor as well as the rich, and is used to enforce violations of employment contracts whether by employer or employee. The critics of the neutrality of law point to much evidence that the law is biased not only in implementation, such as the much greater imprisonment of Aborigines than whites for the same offences, but also in its construction. The treatment of business corporations as individuals under the law, for example, contributes to the successes and excesses of monopoly capitalism.



In any university law school there are some who emphasise the technical and procedural aspects of law indicated above. In most cases, the traditionalists predominate, and the struggles over the form and content of law teaching and research are restricted to academic channels. The Macquarie Law School was different because the critical legal scholars developed greater strength. But the traditionalists did not have to accept defeats quietly, because they had powerful outside allies, in particular elites from the legal profession and supporters in government, business, and the media.

Most of the debate about the Macquarie Law School has focused on whether studying law in a critical, sociological way is a proper thing to do, and on the various personality, procedural, and power disputes within the School and Macquarie University. By contrast, little attention is given to the routine exercise of power that quietly shapes all legal teaching and research.

In many law schools around Australia, traditional perspectives to the law receive the bulk of attention. While complaints have been made about the teaching at a number of Australian law schools, problems at Macquarie have generated a remarkable degree of consternation in the media and elsewhere. The difference at Macquarie is that academics with a nontraditional perspective are in the majority. This is not liked by traditionalists in the School and their supporters in the legal profession and elsewhere. This is the simple explanation for why Macquarie University, rather than some other place, has been the scene of a long-running and highly publicised dispute over law. The usual attention to personalities, procedural disputes and so forth, hides this point.

The case described here is exceptional in that the usual academic struggles involving power and knowledge became public. It should be remembered that similar although less spectacular struggles take place routinely throughout academia.

We have omitted a couple of the examples given by the author due to lack of space. If anyone wishes to receive a copy of the entire article, please contact us at Neucleus, Eds.