

Life in a Graduate School of Business: The Bill Stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents stories to describe the personal and social lifeworlds of 'Bill', a typical academic employed in an autonomous graduate school of business in 2002-2003. The stories are based on interviews with 21 academics in three autonomous graduate schools of business. This is the first stage in a two stage longitudinal research study investigating the tensions between academic values and the corporatisation of higher education. The second stage of the research is currently being undertaken and will be incorporated into the final paper, hence the paper concludes with the issues to be examined in the second stage of the project.

Keywords: Business Schools
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Case Study

In 2007, two important books on business schools were published. Khurana (2007) charts the history and dilemmas of schools in the US and Starkey & Tiratsoo (2007) focus on similar issues predominantly in the UK and Europe. Both books, based on an analysis of history and review of relevant literature, conclude that business schools are facing a ‘crisis of legitimacy’, a crisis exacerbated by imperatives to produce research; contribute to institutional revenue and engage in hyper competition with other business schools as well as private producers and disseminators of business knowledge. Although, business schools are portrayed as having lost their way in terms of professionalising management (Khurana) or providing an arena for reflection and public commentary (Starkey & Tiratsoo), they are also viewed as a possible forerunner for the future of higher education as it becomes increasingly commodified and utilitarian. The position of Australian business schools is less clear. Despite their disproportionately large size and considerable financial contribution to their institutions and Australia’s export industry, research on Australian business schools is scarce. Two exceptions are Byrt’s (1989) chapter on management education in Australia and a detailed study of Australian business schools and education by Cecez-Kecmanovic, Juchau, Kay & Wright (2002). The former, Byrt (1989), was published almost thirty years ago before the majority of current Australian business schools came into existence and the latter, Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. (2002), was commissioned by government and denied publication. Thus given the value of Australian business schools and the dearth of information about them, it is more than timely that they come under examination.

The purpose of this paper is to report findings from the first stage of research into Australian graduate schools of business. The research is broadly concerned with the tensions between academic values and the commodification of higher education. The paper begins with an overview of graduate schools of business, followed by a summary of the method and then the findings in the form of a stories or profiles of a typical graduate business school academic. The final section summarises the issues to be addressed in the second stage of the research project.

AUSTRALIAN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AND GRADUATE SCHOOLS OF BUSINESS

The business school industry has been described as “one of the great (economic) success stories of the past 50 years” (Viten 2000: 183). Australian graduate schools of business (GSB), with their internationally recognised product, the Master of Business Administration (MBA), have taken advantage of deregulated markets for postgraduate and international students, making them a commercial and entrepreneurial success (Ryan & Guthrie 2008a). However, business schools and their place within a university, have been controversial since they first emerged early last century (Byrt 1989; Khurana 2007; Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007). Their history is one of struggling to balance practical relevance with academic rigour (Gordon & Howell 1959; Minzberg 2004; Pfeffer & Fong 2002; 2004; Porter & McKibbin 1988). In more recent decades, it has had to find this balance within the context of being a profit seeking academic unit (Khurana 2007; Ryan & Guthrie 2008b; Starkey & Tiratsoo 2007). Professional master degree programs, especially the MBA, are viewed by some as a means to maximise student fee revenue and cost efficiencies regardless of quality considerations (Rhoades & Slaughter 2004), but management academics are not always comfortable with being viewed simply as a ‘cash cow’ (Stiles 2004). Being entrepreneurial in nature need not imply surrender of traditional academic values. Studies by Bridgman (2007) and Stiles (2004) provide evidence for management academics holding similar values and identities to those of other academics. This is particularly so within academic units able to generate their own resources or to enhance the institutional reputation (Henkel 2004). Autonomous graduate schools of business fit the former criterion, and occasionally the latter.

Autonomous GSB in Australia share several common characteristics. They are a separate academic unit within a faculty, or a faculty in its own right, that is considered a profit centre within the university. Graduate schools of business are multidisciplinary and generally smaller but better resourced than their undergraduate counterparts. They are highly commercial in focus relying wholly on non-government sources of funds such as student fees, executive training courses, consultancies, corporate sponsorship and

grants. Teaching terms and locations are varied with classes being held 12 months a year, at various hours of the day and night and across different sites in Australia and overseas. Individual academics receive salary loadings over and above the prescribed salary level for academics and/or have opportunities to supplement their incomes through additional teaching, training or consulting. It is the competitive and commercialised world of the GSB that provides the background for this research.

METHOD AND CASE STUDY

The research consists of a longitudinal study of 21 academics in three autonomous GSB over two periods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in late 2002 and early 2003, prior to the proposed introduction of a national research assessment framework in 2005. In 2008, the same 21 academics were sent a copy of the findings from the first period in the form of stories or profiles representing the average responses from the total sample and asked to respond by email, telephone or interview on their reflections of similarities and differences in their attitudes over the five year intervening period. At the time of writing this paper, responses to the second phase are not complete, hence the focus on the first phase only.

The participants were 21 full-time academics employed at three autonomous GSB, representing approximately 25 per cent the total academic populations for the three schools. The names of respondents invited to participate in the study were suggested by a senior academic contact in the relevant school. The contact was asked to recommend respondents from the range of disciplines offered and, as much as possible to reflect the age, academic ranking and gender composition of the school population. A summary of the respondents is found in Appendix One. The duration of the interviews was between one and three and half hours and consisted of five open-ended questions with prompts for each question to encourage open and reflective responses and allow respondents to cover the major topics in their own words. Topics included: career, academic life, values, time management and priorities, culture,

governance, pecuniary rewards, teaching and research, transnational teaching and professional desires. Each interview was recorded on a digital device and then transcribed.

Interview transcripts were initially coded according to 19 issues arising from the literature and from the interviews. These codes were further reduced to 139 codes that were amalgamated into two meta-themes, personal and social lifeworlds, consisting of four themes within each of the meta-themes. The personal lifeworld included the themes: espoused values; work attitudes; relationships; and academic lifestyle, and the social lifeworld included the themes: culture; governance; leadership; and Entrepreneurship. Each meta-theme was then translated into a story about 'Bill', the story of an average academic that represented the most common responses within each of the themes. The use of the male gender simply reflects the majority of male respondents.

The research is necessarily limited in scope and method. The scope of the research has two main limitations. First, because the sample is limited to full-time academics, the important impacts arising from the casualisation of academic labour are excluded from the study. Second, the restriction imposed by ethics approval on naming and comparing schools limits the depth of understanding some important differences between schools that affect values and attitudes. Also the method has limitations usual to qualitative studies, including small sample size and subjectivity in interpretation of interview data. Ethics and access approvals to conduct the research were granted conditional upon an assurance of individual and institutional confidentiality and anonymity. Hence no attempt is made to compare or contrast the three schools, and background information on each school is limited. Academics from all schools are viewed as the one sample. Although there are some differences between the schools in history, operations and culture, the research focus was on the academics as a group not comparisons between schools. For the remainder of the paper, material from the combined sample is referred to as 'the School' or the 'AGSB'.

Critical theory, specifically Habermas' theory of communicative action is employed as the overarching theoretical framework for the research. Habermas' theory is well suited to analyse processes and impacts of value changes in organisations and societies. It has as its focus the understanding and assessment of major cultural, societal and personal values or 'lifeworld' changes in organisations brought about by 'steering media' such as budgets, rules and politicians. For example, in the context of the corporatisation of universities, globalisation may be viewed as an external force requiring either a change in personal lifeworld (academic values) or a change in organisation (university), or both, to adapt to different circumstances. The question is whether the steering media (policy makers, university administrators and funding mechanisms) are creating change in their own interests, constitutive change, to subvert the lifeworld through colonising values. or directing change for the good of society, regulative change, in order to enhance lifeworlds. Responses to changes in steering media include rebuttal, reorientation, evolution or colonisation. Responses that indicate constitutive change include rebuttal and colonisation while regulative change is represented by reorientation and evolution (Broadbent, Laughlin & Read 1991; Burrell 1994).

In order to understand the impacts of recent changes in higher education on the lifeworlds of academics, it is necessary to engage in conversations (interviews) with academics. Discussion of the external forces and changes affecting higher education is beyond the scope of this paper, however, such discussion can be found in Ryan, Guthrie & Neumann (2008) and Ryan & Guthrie (2008a; 2008 b). The focus of this paper is on the conversations with the academics and a description of their lifeworlds. Hence, there are three 'Bill' stories. The first is a general profile of Bill, his background and a summary of his 'lifeworlds'; the second story is a summary of Bill's personal 'lifeworld' or identity; and the third is a summary of his attitudes to his social 'lifeworld' or the School. The following section presents the three stories of Bill.

THE BILL STORIES

1. Bill of the AGSB: General Profile

Bill is a 45 year old Australian born male who worked for eight years outside academe before obtaining a PhD and becoming a full-time academic whereupon he worked for three other universities prior to taking up his current position as Senior Lecturer in the AGSB seven years ago. He has been an academic for 16 years. Bill became an academic because his early experiences of teaching were very positive and he enjoyed being in control of his own work and time. He enjoys being an academic because students are a priority but there is still time for research and the environment is stimulating. The most valued aspect of his work is his freedom over what he teaches and researches and the times in which he does it. Over the years he has noticed that the number of administrators has increased while collegiality and support to academics has decreased and there is more pressure in every aspect of work.

Bill values academic freedom and integrity and is committed to his work. His loyalty is to his School and colleagues, although not always to the Dean. Colleagues, students and the stimulating work environment are the best aspects of working in a GSB while managerialist practices and pressures of time and workload are the downside of the GSB. Compared to working in a larger school with both undergraduates and postgraduates, the GSB is preferred because of the students and the stronger culture. Teaching and research are equally valued by Bill, but teaching takes precedence because of its urgency. Although the School is multidisciplinary, this is limited to interaction with colleagues and students because research and publication is still disciplinary based. Autonomous governance of the GSB is important to Bill, even if the Dean is not always collegial. According to Bill, Dean's come and go, the culture and collegiality of GSB academics are stronger than a single Dean. The wider University is a threat to the autonomy of the GSB because, according to Bill, it fears the difference and wants more revenue from the GSB. Any additional remuneration that Bill receives, he believes he deserves because it is commensurate with the additional effort he makes compared to other academics outside his GSB. Inappropriate bureaucratic administrative

processes are a source of stress and frustration for Bill but he does not blame the school's administrative staff for these processes.

While Bill appreciates the maturity and motivation of his students and learns a lot from them, the fact that they pay high fees encourages them to behave like customers which is a source of discomfort for Bill. Teaching offshore is good for Bill in terms of his self development and time and opportunity for research, however, it is not good for his health and disruptive to his family life. The initial attraction of travel and extra money wears off after a year or so. Bill describes his School environment as hard working, friendly and collegial. Bill's lifestyle as an academic is different to most academics as their hours and places of work are very diverse. Although Bill is quite content with his life and work at the GSB, in an ideal world he would like more time for research and greater collegiality with less managerialism and administrative interference.

2. Identity: the personal lifeworld of Bill of the AGBS in 2002/03.

Values

Prior to becoming an academic, Bill worked for private industry where he resented the command and control environment. He enrolled in a part-time higher degree and became a casual teacher. It was during this time that his teaching experience and glimpses of academic life convinced him to change to an academic career. He made this change at the earliest possible opportunity and has no regrets. Although he often feels pressured by work, Bill is passionate about his work and he values both the stimulating environment and his control over time and work. He espouses the values of academic integrity, especially honesty and academic freedom, and remains committed to teaching and learning. In the course of his academic career, Bill has noticed an increasing number of administrators and administrative processes which threaten his autonomy and consume his valuable time. He believes in the need for quality assurance and performance review processes but is cynical about the usefulness of the processes used by the School. Despite being strongly committed to his School and school colleagues, Bill's loyalty to the

School is tempered by his view of the Dean. According to Bill, a 'good' dean makes the school vibrant and 'bad' dean inspires resistance from him and his colleagues as they attempt to protect the School from 'harmful' interference.

Work Attitudes

Colleagues, students and teaching represent the highlights of Bill's work environment. While work pressure, lack of time and administrative interference are the downside of work, Bill would much prefer to work in the small graduate business school than in a large faculty. His students are more mature and motivated and his School culture stronger and more cohesive. Teaching and research constitute most of Bill's work time, but he also has significant administrative duties and occasionally finds time to do some consulting or teach in executive education. He believes teaching and research are equally important for an academic, however Bill is more inclined toward teaching, partly because of personal preference and partly because of the nature of the School and its emphasis on teaching. The importance of research for promotion does not escape Bill and he is sometimes resentful of this. Bill enjoys being in a multidisciplinary environment because it is stimulating and contributes to his own learning. He admits however that being a multidisciplinary school does not always translate into his teaching and research. Teaching overseas is a big plus for Bill despite it being tiring and detracting from other work. He not only enjoys travel and getting away but benefits personally from learning about other cultures and it improves his teaching.

Relationships

Bill's relationship with his School colleagues is important to him. He and his colleagues form a good team because they are similarly motivated and committed. The bond between them is strengthened more by the non- traditional hours and locations in which they teach and the ownership they feel for the courses offered than by sharing disciplines. Bill respects his colleagues for their intelligence and hard work, and, in the rare times it is possible, he likes to relax socially with them. Likewise, Bill's attitude toward his

students is positive. Because the students are mature, experienced and motivated, teaching is a two way learning experience. Students provide Bill with a closer understanding of the issues confronting business and management and they are not afraid to confront him or each other. The diversity of nationalities among students sometimes presents challenge for Bill, but, on balance, he believes the diversity enriches the learning experience for all and outweighs any negatives.

There is one issue that troubles Bill about his students and that is their tendency to see themselves as customers rather than students. He understands they pay high fees and are entitled to a good educational experience but he does not believe they have the right to define what that education is. Occasionally he worries that the administration views students as customers and places pressure on him to teach and assess in a way that suits the students' wants rather than needs. He does not like this. He prefers to teach onshore students because there is more time to build relationships with them and they are usually more able students. Bill views his relationship with School administration officers as a 'partnership', they are part of the same team and he gets along well with them. These feelings do not apply to University administrators whom Bill feels are controlling and untrusting of academics. They waste his time with petty procedures.

Lifestyle

While appreciating the flexibility and autonomy of his work, Bill acknowledges that lack of time and excess pressure undermine much of this flexibility and autonomy. Bill does not teach according to a constant timetable or at the same location. He teaches at night, during weekends, on a weekly basis and in blocs. Moreover, he teaches on-campus, overseas and on other campuses in the city and throughout Australia. He is an itinerant, who, in addition to his own work, must supervise the work of casual academics. His teaching load is higher than it would be if he worked in a large faculty but so is his remuneration. Bill has the opportunity to volunteer for additional teaching for additional income. He often accepts additional teaching to supplement his income which he considers much less than it would be

were he still in industry. Bill is also under pressure to research and publish. He enjoys his research but is sometimes cynical about the pressure to publish regardless of quality. Bill tries to arrange his teaching to allow time for research, but this always seems to be squeezed between teaching and administration. Although Bill would prefer to be teaching and researching only, he accepts administrative or governance roles because they are necessary and it is an important contribution to the School. Bill likes to consult but there is little time to do so. Some of his colleagues are able to substitute consulting for research, but they are the minority.

3. The School: the social lifeworld of Bill of the AGBS in 2002/03.

Culture

Bill describes his School's culture as strong and dynamic. Its strength derives from its relatively small size; shared values and goals; difference from most other schools in the university and the changes that it has undergone. In particular, Bill points out that the School culture is more enduring than the Deans who pass through it. It is reasonably collegial, but more in the sense of respect for colleagues and shared values than in terms of governance. Bill and his colleagues are too busy to engage in full collegial governance. It is essentially a friendly and hard working School.

Governance

Bill and his colleagues demonstrate little loyalty toward the University. They view the management of the University as threatening the School's autonomy; unable to understand its differences and concerned only with increasing the University's share of the School's revenue. The University has embraced managerialism and revenue generation to the detriment of academics and academic issues, turning itself into a knowledge factory. The School's governance changes with the Dean, inspiring either collegiality or managerialism (in the negative sense of command and control). Because the School is a profit centre, issues of governance are more complex than academic matters alone. A purely collegial system would not work as it is time consuming and often non-decisive. The best system is one based on clear and agreed

goals with open discussion followed by decision-making from the Dean and implementation by the responsible academics or administrators. Bill feels he can have input into decisions but recognizes that he is not part of the decision-making. He is comfortable with this as earlier experiences with interminable meetings without decisions being made has made him skeptical of fully collegial models of School governance.

Leadership

The leadership or Dean of the School is important to Bill and his colleagues. The Dean's allegiances and management style can 'make or break' the School. Deans can encourage loyalty and commitment to the School by providing focus, treating academics with respect and fostering collegiality. If the Dean wants to go in a direction that Bill and his colleagues do not consider to be in the interests of the School, the Dean has to contend with resistance from academic staff which may take the shape of either actively working against the Dean or withdrawing additional effort and commitment to the School. Bill and his colleagues do not like being treated as employees, they desire respect from their leaders and want to be included in issues affecting the School. Deans who appear to be doing the bidding of the University against the School are especially out of favour. Possibly even worse than an autocratic Dean, is one who is 'laissez-faire' and under whom nothing happens. Sometimes Bill thinks academics are really not sufficiently skilled or trained to be good leaders or managers.

Entrepreneurship

At the University level, Bill believes that monetary concerns have overtaken all else. The University wants to make money but its bureaucratic administration and lack of managerial skills work against it being entrepreneurial in a positive sense. The School is viewed as a 'cash cow' by the University and so rather than invest in it, the University only wants to strip it. Bill does not consider this is a sensible entrepreneurial strategy. The School has been entrepreneurial in terms of opening up new markets, offering new courses and engaging with the business community. Bill is aware that growth and

entrepreneurialism have been good for the School in terms of increasing resources and reputation and he feels comfortable with this. He believes that students are given a good deal compared to other students of the University and other graduate schools. Despite this, Bill is always wary that the University and its desire for more of the School's funds is a threat to the School being able to continue as it has, including being able to be entrepreneurial. Very occasionally, Bill wonders if the School itself is putting money ahead of academic concerns.

ISSUES FOR STAGE TWO OF THE RESEARCH

Over the five years since the first interviews, there have been significant changes, both institutionally and personally for all 21 of the academics. The original Deans of all three schools are no longer in the School or in the position of Dean. Two of schools have merged with larger undergraduate faculties, partly to provide larger discipline based clusters in readiness for the proposed national research assessment exercise. Only four of the 21 academics remain in their original graduate school of business. Seven of the original 21 have moved to other universities, seven have remained at the same university either within the new merged faculty (5) or another faculty (2), two have taken positions in industry and one has retired.

In the second phase of the research in 2008, the original 21 participants have been asked to respond to the 'Bill' stories by indicating, firstly, how realistically the stories reflect their views and situation as remembered five years ago, and secondly, how and why their present circumstances and experiences over the past five years have affected their views in terms of differences from those reflected in the stories. The second round of responses is designed to elicit any changes that may have occurred because of changes in the system, albeit the school, their institution or the higher education system. The nature of the responses should indicate whether constitutive or regulative change has occurred, the former indicating a forced change against the personal lifeworld of the academic, and the latter indicating an acceptance of change in the interests of the personal lifeworld of the academic.

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Details of Respondent Academics

<i>Item</i>	<i>Sub Item</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Position	Professor	6	29
	Associate Professor	1	5
	Senior Lecturer	6	29
	Lecturer	8	38
Gender	Female	6	29
	Male	15	71
Place of Birth	Australia	13	62
	Not Australia	8	38
Age	Range	26 – 59	
	Mean	45	
	Median	45	
Current Field of Study	HRM/OB/IR	6	29
	Marketing	4	19
	Accounting/Finance	4	19
	Quantitative/IT	4	19
	Strategy	3	14
Undergraduate Studies	Accounting/Finance	6	29
	Marketing/Management	4	19
	Maths/Statistics	3	14
	Sociology	2	10
	Psychology	2	10
	Economics	2	10
	Health related	2	10
Career	Academic only	7	33
	Industry experience	14	66
Academic Career	Worked at other institutions	17	81
	Only at current school	4	19
Years in Academe	Range	1 – 35	
	Mean	16	
	Median	17	
Years in Current School	Mean	6	
	Median	7	

