

Silencing Universities by Stealth: An Invisible Consequence of our University Crisis

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Independent, well-informed experts from academia largely serve as bastions of evidence-based social and scientific commentary, ensuring integrity and accuracy amidst the deluge of false narratives. However, although it is enshrined in the legislature that universities should act as a critic and conscience of Aotearoa New Zealand, this role provides limited financial benefits to the university's bottom line. As financial drivers have become more influential in determining what is taught and how staff spend their time, this public good, which has always been on the periphery of staff tasks, is slowly disappearing. As an example, academics at Massey University have previously been active and vocal researchers, educators, and critics of the state of freshwater in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, Professor Russell Death and Dr Mike Joy, who have led the freshwater ecology team, have now both been pressured to leave, so in 2024, Massey University will no longer teach any courses in freshwater ecology. Neither of us was made redundant or directly asked to leave, but the constantly shifting teaching pressures and altered managerial priorities have left us both at Massey without time and/or support to continue our community outreach and public engagement. We will provide examples of the difficulty of being a critic and conscience at a university where the financial bottom line is the key imperative. Unfortunately, the dwindling number of freshwater ecology graduates being trained and the lack of critical commentary on Aotearoa New Zealand's freshwater crisis may go largely unnoticed. We believe the current university crisis will exacerbate the loss of this essential public good, with few people even aware of what has been lost.

Introduction

Public institutions, such as universities, provide many non-monetary public services that are often taken for granted by wider society and usually overlooked in the financial accounting of our current university crisis and/or until unforeseen needs arise, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Baker et al., 2020; Callender, 2024; Kvalsvig and Baker, 2021, MBIE, 2022). Universities have historically engaged in a wide range of research endeavours, many of which have no obvious or immediate financial return or will be funded

by the conventional industry and government funding routes (e.g., food web theory in ecology). Who would have thought Aotearoa New Zealand would have a vibrant space industry ten years ago? The very definition of an unforeseen need or as-yet-developed field of enquiry means conventional government or industry funding and/or research agencies are unlikely to have anticipated them and consequently will be unable to respond. Furthermore, even in fields where there are clearly defined problems, for example, the management of freshwater; funding and, hence, research focus often find their way to more conventional approaches less critical of current management (see later for more discussion on this; Hendy (2016); Joy (2015, 2024)).

One of these important non-monetary services universities provide for the public is the role of critic and conscience of society (Crozier, 2000; Jones et al., 2000), which is enshrined in our legal system in the Education and Training Act (Ministry of Education, 2020). Section 160 of the Act outlines that

“Every person concerned in the provision of tertiary education has . . . the freedom to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions.”

Furthermore, this aligns with international institutions such as UNESCO, to which New Zealand belongs, that emphasise the rights of higher education teaching personnel to freely express their opinions and contribute to social change through their work, which was adopted in 1997 (Jones et al., 2000). In contrast to many other nations like the USA (Mirowski, 2018), research funding in Aotearoa New Zealand leans heavily on government support, resulting in a science system with a strong commercial focus and limited autonomy from central government (Gluckman, 2016; Leitch et al., 2013; OECD, 2022; Russell, 2023, MBIE, 2021). It can, therefore, be challenging to fund projects that might be contrary to government and/or conventional wisdom. Furthermore, all government and Crown Research Institute scientists must have public or media statements cleared by their organisations prior to release. Again, they are limiting the opportunity

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for more critical comments on current policy approaches and/or limiting future opportunities for funding. Securing limited government funding is difficult enough without the impression one is a scientist critical of the status quo and/or research conclusions made by other scientists (Jones et al., 2000). Veteran academic freedom campaigner Jane Kelsey summed it up in her speech, at a conference on academic freedom held at Massey University in Wellington in 2021, saying “By far the most sinister and all-pervading threat to the future of academic freedom is expressed through economic pressure”.

Therefore, the role of critic and conscience for society, to keep Aotearoa New Zealand on the track of public good and advancement, only appears to be provided by staff of universities in Aotearoa New Zealand. A role that because it offers no monetary benefit for universities (in fact quite the opposite) is slowly disappearing in Aotearoa New Zealand. One of us (MKJ) was awarded the inaugural Universities New Zealand Critic and Conscience of Society Award in 2017 and is well known throughout Aotearoa New Zealand as an outspoken critic of the failures of multiple governments and industry to protect freshwaters (Joy, 2015; Joy and Canning, 2020). The other (RGD) is a less publicly well-known freshwater ecologist who was awarded the New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society medal in 2017 and has published over 130 journal publications. Together we have run an active research, teaching, and outreach programme in freshwater ecology from 1993 to 2023 at Massey University. This, in turn, has produced over 60 postgraduates and numerous undergraduates, many of whom are now in turn outspoken critics of better freshwater management, employed in government departments, regional councils, and NGOs. However, we have both felt pressured to leave Massey University under the stress of constantly shifting teaching pressures and altered managerial priorities without time and/or support to continue community outreach and public engagement, although neither of us was made redundant or directly asked to leave. Thus in 2024 Massey University will not teach any freshwater ecology and any public comment on freshwater management could only come from the School of Agriculture and Environment staff trained in agriculture not ecology; with, one could argue, perhaps a different perspective of freshwater management.

The quiet silencing

While the very public job losses at many of our universities are a clear and obvious loss of research, teaching and public comment in many areas of critical importance to Aotearoa New Zealand, the consequences of the apparent changing focus of universities to income generation and not public good also affect those left employed. Some critical subjects, such as physical geography (the educational backbone for flood managers), have gone completely at Massey. However, part of the financial equation of the crisis is fewer staff to teach courses, who consequently have less time for research and outreach. To the best of our knowledge, there has been no comment on the reduced opportunity and /or time for public comment caused by the refocusing on teaching. While there are still courses in freshwater ecology at other

universities, we believe the more questioning perspective we taught on freshwater management at Massey University has been lost forever with our departure.

Our personal stories

Professor Russell Death

I (RGD) started at Massey University as a postdoc in 1991 and have spent 32 years researching, teaching, and supporting many NGOs in resource management arenas. I have held two international fellowships, conducted research in Spain, the UK, the USA, and Chile and published widely in top ecology journals. I have taught many current government scientists, university academics, and advocates for better freshwater management; the latter including Mike Joy, Lan Pham, Marnie Prickett and Tom Kay. My evidence has been pivotal in several environmental wins for rivers such as the Horizon’s One Plan and the Ruataniwha Dam decision (Chisholm et al., 2014; Death, 2015), and I have contributed to many forums to increase public awareness of the state of freshwater in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The last few years (2021 – 2023) at Massey University have seen course offerings in ecology constantly changing. In 2021, my postgraduate course in freshwater ecology was cancelled, my third-year community ecology was cancelled, and I was tasked with developing a new second-year course in ecosystem health to replace microbial ecology. However, this reorganisation was again restructured the following year to allow for a combination of campus-specific courses and joint teaching between the Albany and Manawatu Massey campuses. The new course – taught just once – was cancelled, and the cancelled third-year course was reinstated but with joint campus teaching (despite Albany having no community ecologists). Not only that, but the third-year freshwater ecology course was moved to the second year to provide a “unique” Manawatu campus paper. Finally, in 2023 all ecology staff in Albany were given redundancy notices. This year (2024), there is no freshwater ecology taught anywhere at Massey University.

The constant restructuring of course offerings (and the associated administration), development of new courses taught for only a short time, lack of clarity on which staff contributed to the newly organised courses, and even the movement of a third-year course to the second-year meant I was spending the majority of my time trying to keep up with the repeatedly changing teaching requirements. This period was the first time in my 32-year career that I did not submit any research manuscripts for journal publication. I was even told in my 2021 Performance Review that because I had a good research record, I could afford to do less research while dealing with the constantly changing teaching demands. Furthermore, conducting any research when you did have time became extremely challenging. Getting permission to travel anywhere, even on funded research, required the approval of the Head of Group, Head of School, and Pro-Vice Chancellor. Perhaps this change to management protocols was “unique” to the Ecology group or Massey, but the strong implication I had was that the University was very focused on teaching and cost saving, to the detriment of

research or community outreach. In particular, the outreach work I did with iwi and hapū also seemed of less value to my managers as it was usually not associated with significant funding.

Providing critical commentary on topical issues has never been easy at universities, despite the commonly held belief of the public. The University supports it in principle; however, when the comment is counter to that held by large funders, government and/or corporate interests, one is often invited for a discussion with senior leadership. I believe it has impacted my ability to get funding. For example, despite having published extensively on the topic, the Ministry for the Environment barred me from tendering for a research project on measuring river habitat because I was apparently not on “the list”. Furthermore, who can blame funders for wanting to finance “feel-good” research that will not ruffle industry feathers, rather than research that demands a radical rethink of current practice (e.g., it’s more acceptable to give cows a magic pill to reduce nitrate leaching than to reduce the number of cows). Thus, when job security is under threat, teaching pressures are increasing, and precious time for research is shrinking, the last thing you want to do is provide critical commentary that will put you out of favour with your managers and/or potential funders (Jones et al., 2000). The lack of time and support to conduct research, assist local communities, and/or provide commentary on freshwater management issues led me to leave Massey to pursue these goals as an unfunded independent researcher. Only a small subset of researchers are brave enough to provide critical public comment in the first place, and, as I illustrated with my situation, even though I was motivated to speak out, the changing landscape of the university made that increasingly difficult. I suspect I am not alone among university academics in my frustration with the changing landscape of university employment, with the increased focus on teaching, higher teaching loads per staff member, reduced time and funding for research, and the lack of support or incentive to speak out in public, particularly on controversial topics.

Dr Mike Joy

I (MKJ) started at Massey University as a mature distance student who went on to complete a master’s and PhD in ecology and then began teaching environmental science and ecology in 2003 (Joy, 2024). The courses I taught involved inviting speakers to provide conventional perspectives on environmental management but also alternative critical commentary on what was not working with current practice. Although I published many conventional journal articles, I have also taken advantage of many media opportunities for public outreach of science and the growing crisis in Aotearoa New Zealand freshwater management. I was awarded numerous prizes for this work, including the Royal Society Te Apārangi’s Fleming Award in 2013 and Callaghan medal in 2023, and Universities New Zealand’s inaugural Critic and Conscience of Society Award in 2017.

Despite fulfilling what is stated as one of the University’s important roles as a public commentator on

the environment in Aotearoa New Zealand, I was regularly invited to talk with senior leadership about my public commentary. On occasion, these discussions involved the university lawyers. I also constantly found myself at odds with other staff and the Head of School in the agriculturally focussed School for Agriculture and Environment where I was employed. Thus, when an opportunity arose at what I thought was a more academically egalitarian research organisation – the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies at Victoria University – I moved to Wellington. Regrettably, the Institute closed in 2022 because of a cash-strapped Victoria University (Boston, 2021). However, when an opportunity did arise in another part of the University, the School of Geography, Environment, and Earth Sciences, I was not offered the position despite apparently being the preferred candidate. Following the subsequent press coverage of the situation, the Morgan Foundation offered to fund a half-time position at Victoria so that I could continue my research, outreach, and critique of New Zealand’s environmental management.

Thus, throughout my academic career, although I have ironically been lauded with awards for my critical commentary on environmental management in Aotearoa New Zealand, university leadership were rarely encouraging and, on occasion, actually obstructive to me conducting this supposedly important role of the University. Furthermore, when push came to shove in the current cash-strapped University environment, it was a private philanthropist who provided the funding to keep my current work funded, not the University. There is obviously confusion amongst university leadership in where and how the respective components of the purpose of a university fit into their strategy. I think the public has an expectation that university experts will provide informed comments on controversial topics for the greater good in Aotearoa New Zealand; however, the “university” can see such activities may not always be beneficial for some of its wealthier funders and/or the government (Callender, 2024). Thus, there is a catch-22 situation: awards are given for speaking out, but promotion and even employment may suffer as a result.

Are we the exceptions?

Perhaps we are just two has-been freshwater ecologists with antiquated perspectives on what universities should provide for society. But the role of critic and conscience has always been challenged, even by university leadership charged with protecting it. Perhaps the most infamous public example was the attempts to silence academics at National Women’s Hospital in Auckland over their published assessment of cervical cancer treatment that eventually led to the Cartwright Inquiry of 1987/88 (Cartwright, 1988; Jones, 2017; McIndoe et al., 1984). Another public example relates to the safety of the drug fenoterol, which was questioned in a research article by academics at the Wellington School of Medicine, University of Otago (Crane et al., 1989; Pearce, 2007). However, most challenges to academic freedom will have escaped public attention and/or documentation; in

fact, the greatest censoring of academic freedom is often self-imposed by academics because of their funding, promotion and time management concerns. On the flip side of these concerns is the use of industry-funded university research to promote potentially harmful disinformation, epitomised by the activities of the tobacco industry and, more recently, the fossil-fuel industry, but for which there are numerous examples, some of which are outlined in Callender (2024).

We have both found it very challenging to perform the role of public critique under the leadership of an often discouraging university and to be at least partly career-limiting (although we also acknowledge some leaders, such as former VC Steve Maharey, have been extremely supportive of our activities in this area). It doesn't bring in money for cash-strapped universities and may actually discourage funders if they are the ones being criticised; it takes time and energy that are currently being drained in the constant rationalisation of courses and staff numbers and appears to be given little if any consideration in academic promotions. If university leadership are choosing who to retain between two equally qualified staff, it is not hard to see how they might favour the person more compliant with external views of the likes of government and/or other funding organisations.

We believe this tenuous but critical role of universities is being indirectly squeezed by the reduction in staff, increase in teaching loads, and increased job insecurity. We have both experienced the challenges of trying to speak out and perform all the other tasks required of a university academic. One of us has had to abandon academia, and the other has required funding from an external philanthropic organisation to continue the roles of critic and conscience. As we both know how hard it is to perform this task in a classical university environment, we have grave fears that those left standing at universities will not have the energy and enthusiasm to perform this vital role. While it is understandable that the loss of entire subjects and/or reduction in critical mass at our universities has been paramount in the discussion on the university crisis, it is also important that many other services offered by universities are also quietly disappearing as the more outspoken critical academics are pushed aside to increase teaching revenue in alternative ventures, such as campuses in Singapore.

Possible Solutions

In Aotearoa New Zealand, it could be argued that the public is often a little too accepting of conventional perspectives purported by the "establishment", although that is perhaps changing slowly. We have an increasing number of independent government-appointed watchdogs for consumers, banks, race relations and the environment, to name but a few, and the worries of disinformation are definitely more widely discussed (Berentson-Shaw, 2018; Hendy, 2016). But, from our experiences in the field of environmental management, we know that critical commentary usually comes with considerable personal and career risk. The supposedly "protected" ivory towers of academia are often touted as one of the pillars of critical

comment on society; however, even here, it is still an extremely risky endeavour taken up by only the brave few. Current changes in university focus away from public good and discourse to more monetary goals (i.e., bums on seats) are making this role for academics harder or even impossible. Perhaps the loss of this public good is the price we must pay for changing priorities in tough financial times. Or alternatively, the role of an academic and/or universities may be changing away from the widely held public view of an organisation of wise scholars providing intellectual discourse and wisdom (Connell, 2019, 2022; Macfarlane, 2021). However, we think this is exactly when such a role is even more important so that short-term financial gain is not prioritised at the expense of future profits, less vocal members of society, future generations, or even just ill-informed decisions.

We believe the nature of the extremely small science funding pool in Aotearoa New Zealand with its very government-focused agendas (Leitch et al., 2013; OECD, 2022; Russell, 2023) makes it very difficult, even in supposedly independent universities, for outspoken comment if an individual wants any semblance of funding for their research. We seem to lack much of the more independent philanthropist funding that other countries, such as the USA have, although they, too, have their own challenges (Callender, 2024; Morris and Jacquet, 2024). We are not sure increased funding for universities will necessarily ensure the very valuable but unmonetizable "critic and conscience" of society role of universities would return, as funding schemes in Aotearoa New Zealand still make it a risky move for anyone wanting smooth career advancement and success with research funding. It might increase the pool of potential critics. However, the environment is the basis of so much of Aotearoa New Zealand's economy, culture, and broader well-being and can so easily be destroyed or impaired; furthermore, once gone ecosystems can never truly be restored. We need truly independent agencies and/or individuals who can speak critically and accurately about the environment, science, and its implications. One solution would be the appointment or funding of longer-term research positions, either within or as an adjunct to a university, similar to the early career scientists such as Rutherford Fellows, but part of whose specifically stated goal is to critically comment on their area of science expertise. The Public Health Communication Centre appears to act as one such successful venue for experts in the public health arena, although again, it is privately funded by a philanthropic entity. Some of Aotearoa New Zealand's other funding schemes, such as the National Science Challenges and Centres of Research Excellence, don't appear to achieve what we would consider critical commentary. We suspect this is because, by design, they accumulate like-minded scientists from as wide a cross-section of Aotearoa New Zealand organisations as possible, not the noisy ones outside the "in-groups" claiming the former have got it all wrong. We were certainly left wondering when the University of Waikato developed a funding bid for a Centre of Research Excellence

in Freshwater Management, why we two appeared to be the only freshwater ecologists in New Zealand not directly involved.

The solution for such a complicated problem, will undoubtedly not come from any single magic action but more likely from multiple smaller steps that each contribute to better outcomes. However, the current reliance on a few altruistic, self-motivated, outspoken individuals will not ensure the function persists, especially as many of those same people are the ones leaving universities in this “crisis”. Aside from the obvious answer of providing support, time, and reward for those who perform the role of critic and conscience of society, we are not sure how best to ensure universities maintain this function. Although the function of a university as a critic is enshrined in legislation it appears to us from our experience it is not a function that universities perform well. Perhaps the recent events now characterised as a university crisis will provide the motivation for the likes of the University Advisory Group chaired by Sir Peter Gluckman to reevaluate how universities function in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In conclusion, within the wider context of issues associated with recent changes in how Aotearoa New Zealand universities operate, our biggest worry is that the vital public good of “critic and conscience of society” that most of the public value, but takes for granted, is slowly disappearing from our universities as the financial pressures lead to fewer staff trying to do more of the money earning tasks of an academic and less of the public good education. Timothy Snyder, in one of his essays on defending institutions, gives the example of how many of the Jewish community in 1930’s Nazi Germany believed a European power would always act ethically. In this example and others, it is easy for the public to assume institutions will always protect themselves, yet they often fail too, unless defended from outside (Snyder, 2017). The critic and conscience role of academics has never been more crucial than it is now as Artificial Intelligence advances challenge even believing what we see with our own eyes. It is thus perhaps no coincidence that as financial motivations challenge the prevalence of public good, this unique role for our universities has also never been so threatened. In the words of the Joni Mitchell song Big Yellow Taxi “Don’t it always seem to go. That you don’t know what you’ve got. Till it’s gone.” and even then, will most New Zealanders notice? As we both enter our senior years and reflect on the future, we hope that we are not the last generation of publicly critical university academics.

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