

# The Australian

## Invasion of aca-zombies

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### **THE deadly hand of corporatism has drained all life from campus.**

UNIVERSITIES are increasingly populated by the undead: a listless population of academics, managers, administrators and students, all shuffling to the beat of the corporatist drum.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the terrifying zombie plague that has swept through the sector is now the subject of serious scholarly attention (books, articles, conferences) as surviving academics investigate how we have descended into this miasma.

So who or what exactly is responsible for tertiary zombification? Is there an antidote? Perhaps a clue lies in the recent independent movie *Pontypool*, in which the zombie virus is spread through endearments such as honey and sweetheart. The contagion is rapid and lethal, infecting all those who come into contact with such banal sweeteners.

Similar lexical vacuity exists in today's university campuses, which have become hollowed-out spaces containing soulless buildings: food courts like any zombified shopping centre; eerily deserted libraries; and hi-tech lecture amphitheatres.

In this bleak landscape the source of the zombie contagion lurks in the form of dead hand, mechanical speech. Academic zombie speech is peppered with affectless references to DEST points, citation indices, ERA rankings, ARC applications, esteem factors, FoR codes, AUQA reviews and the like. Aca-zombies participate in numerous Rber-zombified, government-sponsored quality assurance exercises, presided over by powerful external assessors.

Many zombies have long lost the capacity to distinguish between a place of learning and a money-making PR machine, mummified in red tape. They appear incapable of responding meaningfully to the tyranny of performance indicators, shifting promotion criteria, escalating workload demands and endless audits, evaluations and reviews.

The enculturation of such practices has been known to produce catatonia in zombie academics, who often collapse on hearing the word quality, knowing this usually means more hard labour. But try as they may to resist, zombies merely acquiesce to the corporatist line. They even come to believe corporatist language promotes transparency and accountability. The viral effects of such delusions are such that many aca-zombies do not even realise they have already passed over into the valley of shadows. Work formerly conducted at university (remember teaching and research?) has been replaced by a sinister doppelganger: bureaucratically generated compliance.

The virus is also present among the overworked reserve army of sessional minions, trapped in a stygian netherworld of precarious short-term teaching contracts. This legion of lost souls is the raw material for University Inc, a sinister operation similar to the Umbrella Corporation of the Resident Evil franchise.

Like the undead slaves of voodoo lore, these tutors, entranced perhaps by a misapprehension regarding the status of full-time academic zombies, are mercilessly exploited but expected also to continue producing and publishing

scholarly research.

Often reduced to burned-out husks before finishing postgraduate study, they constitute the core of the academic zombie labour force.

Many students also have succumbed to the zombie virus. Yet some undergraduates manage to retain a vestigial half-life related to their outside commitments: underpaid work, servicing debts, caring for their families, commuting and sometimes (apparently) socialising.

The days when students had time to simply hang out (let alone indulge in, say, critical thinking), are gone.

Students now occupy a joyless twilight world that, superficially at least, resembles a university, although in reality they are vocational charnel houses.

Just as zombies sometimes half-remember how to use revolving doors or firearms, students and academics half-recall that the institution once had a recognisable purpose beyond the imperatives of vocation and the bottom line.

The most curious aspect of this zombie plague, though, is not its devastating effects on those who stagger through the intellectual rubble but the pockets of resistance it fails to quash. A tutorial here, textbook marginalia there, crack squads of indomitable postgrads, secretive cells of idealistic academics and even the odd public intellectual: all scattered signs that intelligent life persists.

Occasionally it is necessary, as in *Zombieland* and *Shaun of the Dead*, to pass as undead to survive. Paradoxically, it is the unthinking intellectual rigor mortis of the present bureaucratic plague that enables some to survive the worst aspects of zombification.

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