

‘McJobs’: a comparison of the academic and McDonald’s casual worker experience

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Abstract: The concept of McDonaldization was coined as a metaphor for the new 'Taylorism' of product standardisation through efficient use of labour and technology by the 'rational' service organisation. Changes to higher education systems under the direction of neoliberal reform have used corporatisation and managerialism to develop universities into 'rational' service organisations and in doing so have made universities an easy target for the application of the McDonaldization concept. As universities transform themselves from social to economic institutions, the exchange value of knowledge, albeit creation, transmission or application, outweighs and overshadows its intrinsic value so that university managers focus on money, markets and efficiencies with the aim of producing the best standard product at the lowest cost. At the same time, governments have adopted the role of consumer protection and watchdog agencies, requiring universities to produce to specified levels and standards, and most importantly account for their actions in doing this. The result has been an increasing similarity between universities and the real McDonald's, quality rules and regulations, cultures of audit, accreditations and accountability, standardisation of programs, more levels of management and surveillance, and increased reliance on cheap and flexible labour. However, it is in the management of labour that universities and McDonald's differ the most. Based on previous research, McDonald's website and results from a case study of casual academic labour, the paper compares McDonald's management of casual staff with that of a university and finds casual employees have better treatment and prospects at McDonald's.

I: Introduction

Over the past two decades, labour markets in many OECD countries have been characterised by an increasing numbers of workers engaged in part-time and casual work (Burgess and Campbell, 1998, Mitchell and Muysken, 2008, Buddelmeyer et al., 2006). Australia typifies this development, with the nation's current low official unemployment rate helping to mask the increasing numbers of workers who are underemployed and engaged in often precarious employment. It is estimated that around 2.1 million workers (i.e. approximately one fifth of all Australian employment) are now employed on a casual basis (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Some of these jobs offer the worker some form of permanency - albeit part-time - and fractional benefits such as sick pay and holiday pay. However, a large proportion of casual employment would be considered to be 'precarious' and insecure (as defined by Burgess and Campbell, 1998), with the worker granted no permanency or fringe benefits. A feature of this labour market trend is the increasing permanence of part-time casual employment. According to ABS statistics, most casuals have been in their current job for more than a year. Over 15 percent of casuals (about 300,000 workers) have been in their job more than five years. Studies show that casual work does not often act as stepping stone to full time work. For

example, Welters and Mitchell (2009) find that under certain circumstances, casual workers in Australia are locked-in to repetitive spells of casual work with little chance of escape.

The permanency of a casualised labour force reflects a deeper structural change in the economy of a move toward 'flexibility' - usually code for a power asymmetry between worker and employer with the latter determining the conditions of flexibility. The concept of McDonaldization was coined as a metaphor for the new 'Taylorism' (e.g. Ritzer, 1993), to reflect this move toward product standardisation through efficient use of labour and technology, where a reliance on flexible labour is integral to the pervasiveness of the 'rational' organisation into all areas of social and economic relations. An important point is that casualisation or 'McDonaldization' of labour markets is not just confined to lower skilled occupations. Internationally, higher education institutions are increasingly reliant on precariously employed sessional academics, with rates of sessional academic labour especially high in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. There is evidence that in some universities the majority of undergraduate courses are delivered by sessional academics (Coates et al., 2009, Percy et al., 2008). In the past two decades, sessional academics in Australia - as a proportion of the total higher education teaching workforce - experienced the greatest growth, increasing from approximately 13 percent in 1989 to 22 percent in 2007 (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2010).

Academic sessional employment – despite its pedagogical integrity (Junor, 2004, Ryan et al., 2011) - often fits the characteristics of 'precarious' employment and functions to reinforce the 'McDonaldization' of the higher education sector. The flexible labour relations and power asymmetry provide a malleable, willing workforce that is used to standardise the process of providing educational services in a competitive global environment. The irony for sessional academics is that the real McDonald's organisation would, as this paper argues, offer more supportive and defined career pathways for ambitious employees, compared with the university sector's treatment of its sessional employees. Further, the training and employment experience offered by McDonald's is widely recognised by private and public sector employers as a strong transferable credential, whereas the transferability of skills developed in sessional academic employment, often in conjunction with earning a PhD, are not always so obvious to those outside of academia.

The paper is structured as follows. Section II establishes the context by a brief discussion of the term 'McDonaldization'. Section III compares academic career pathways for sessional (or casual) workers with the actual McDonald's corporation to evaluate if the use of McDonaldisation is justified as a negative connotation. The paper concludes (Section IV) by arguing that McDonald's management training programs and development of its casualised workforce has lessons for academia.

II: The McDonaldization Process

One of the earlier uses of the McDonaldization concept was by Ritzer (1993) to imply efficiency, calculability, predictability and increased control through replacement of human labour with technology. Ritzer's argument was that the rational organisation has spread into all areas of social and economic relations. The McDonaldization process is, in Ritzer's (1993:9) articulation: "an ever more instrumentally rationalised labour process mirrored in an equally instrumentalised sphere of consumer 'choices' essentially already made, so that standardisation and efficiency become the unifying functional paradigm for society as a whole". Furthermore, this is society in which "people would move from rationalised educational institutions to rationalised workplaces and from rationalised recreational settings to rationalised homes" (Ritzer, 1993:23). Hence this new Taylorism not just transforms labour relations but also consumption and leisure activities.

Since the 1990's the term has been adapted by various writers to describe the position of United Kingdom and United States academic institutions (Hartley, 1995, Margolis, 2004, Garland, 2008). The term is more signifier than analytical concept. According to Margolis (2004) McDonaldization is a useful descriptor of how the process has undermined the authority of academics' ownership of the tools of scholarship and thereby the control of quality control. Students increasingly see education as a form of consumption and demand control, choice and 'edutainment' (Margolis, 2004). Hartley (1995) has applied Ritzer's McDonaldization tenets of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control to reforms within British education of the post-Thatcher era with the emphasis on subjecting public services to the 'disciplines of the market'. Garland (2008) describes McDonaldization as the tendency toward hyper-rationalisation to which every task is broken down into its most finite parts, and so the individual performing it has little or no control, becoming all but interchangeable.

The McDonaldization of education clearly is an implied negative descriptor to reflect increasing student staff ratios, mass classes and the use of low wage teaching assistants. Teaching for both tenured and sessional is becoming a 'McJob' - the growth of the sessional academic typifies this. Table 1 demonstrates how the main features of McDonaldization manifest in the sphere of higher education services.

This hyper-rationalisation of the process of delivering education presents several analogies with the actual McDonald's corporation. Firstly, McDonald's is essentially a franchise of small operating units, akin to that of a university's internal schools or departments. However, McDonald's has institution-wide guidelines on its management practices, especially in regards to casual workers, whereas for universities guidelines are often left to the individual school with little dialogue with other units. Second, the course coordinators and tenured staff of universities are akin to the store managers. This level of management has limited autonomy but is answerable to the demands of the corporation, articulated via mission statements and graduate attributes. The third analogy is that course outlines issued by course coordinators, with the tightly controlled assessment items, function as the recipes and manuals of preparation and delivery to the customer. Fourth, the sessional academic is analogous to the casual counter staff (i.e. 'the crew'). These crew operators are interchangeable. Moreover, course coordinators are required to organise their courses so that any competently qualified person can step in at a moment's notice to fill in for an absent crew member. The more experienced crew members can aspire to be duty tutors (i.e. head crew or in McDonalds 'speak' – first or second assistant), and could even function as course coordinators

Table 1. Summary of the ‘McDonaldization process’ of Higher Education

Main features of the McDonaldization Process	Examples of Impacts for Higher Education
Efficiency	<p>Restructuring the university to reflect market-defined goals of value in terms of government funding and the student as a stakeholder.</p> <p>‘Production line’ of ‘work ready’ graduates to meet the changing needs of capital.</p> <p>Education is a product to be delivered on time and to the customer’s specifications. Education and research are definable and comparable, allowing the customer to ‘shop around’. Funding follows performance rather than precedes it.</p> <p>Institutions focus on revenue raising and cost reduction so staff-student ratios soar.</p>
Calculability	<p>Education and research output reduced to calculable formulas (e.g., student evaluations, number and type of publications, number of citations) to facilitate product comparisons. Specific hours and minutes are allocated for teaching, for each piece of marking and for consultation. International league tables and rankings allow customers to compare quality/cost trade-offs for education consumption.</p>
Predictability	<p>Mass access to education relies on ‘Fordist’ mass production techniques including codified rules and benchmarks such as the AQF and ERA.</p> <p>Bureaucratic rationalisation of teaching and research serves straightforward economic ends.</p> <p>Predictability manifests as product standardisation, achieved through institutional quality audits.</p>
Control	<p>Subjugation of academic autonomy through bureaucratic performance surveillance and measurement through teaching evaluations and research assessments.</p> <p>Replacement and deskilling of academic labour with technology and para-academics.</p>

Source : Adapted from (Hartley, 1995, Margolis, 2004)

in times of staff shortages. To cap the analogy, the current move toward Business School accreditation is akin to the ‘head office stamp of approval’ for product quality, all boxes are ticked regardless of local relevance.

III: The Real McDonald's Experience

The term McDonaldization therefore has negative connotations and applied to universities is bluntly derogatory. It implies that academic institutions are homogenising their products and marketing them with bland, almost meaningless, mission statements. Individual academic differences and robust intellectual debate are played down in order to create a unified public face with the purposes of recruiting students in an increasingly competitive global environment, forming stable business alliances, and maximising access to research funding. Yet as this section demonstrates by highlighting some of the differences in the treatment of casual staff, the actual McDonald's organisation provides better working conditions and opportunities for advancement of its casual staff compared with Australian universities. A genuine embrace of McDonaldization by the academic industry would imply that there is greater attention to career development for part-time and sessional academic staff.

Regular Payment

McDonald's has an automatic payment system for its employees. There is no need to fill in time sheets. Rosters are automatically produced, designed to accommodate where possible the employee's other commitments. When casual employees commence a shift, they log on electronically and use their swipe card. When the shift finishes they automatically log off (personal communication with McDonald's store manager). There is no need for workers to use their own unpaid time to complete timesheets, which is the common practice for sessional academics. McDonald's employees are paid within two weeks maximum of the date of their work. This can be starkly contrasted with the sessional academic experience: "Some casuals had to wait for six weeks to get paid. It is a common story that casuals just do not get paid for weeks waiting for contracts to be authorised" (Respondent No 13 from Ryan et al., 2011).

Training and Development

To be sure, the McDonald's training is standardised, much like the products. Individual differences are subsumed to the point of homogeneity to become part of a well-oiled machine. This obviously is at odds with the traditional tenets of Western academia with the elevation of individual critical, informed and creative thought. However, academic institutions have been emulating the McDonaldization process in product delivery, despite claims of maintaining academic integrity by university managers. Unfortunately for university casual staff, universities have failed to emulate the McDonaldization process in the development and management of casual staff.

McDonald's rigid yet clear training and career pathways are a formulaic and effective way for the organisation to reproduce itself in multiple geographic locations and ensure corporate sustainability. The training process is essential in maintaining a standardised product and focus on its corporate objectives. In contrast, academia's ad hoc approach to staff training, coupled with a sometimes blatant disregard for providing articulated career pathways for its sessional staff of which great proportion of teaching load is resting, is at risk of undermining the future sustainability of the sector. In a Marxist twist, academia's desire to rationalise the production process, such as the heavy reliance on casualisation in first year teaching without adequate investment in the training and career development of this hidden workforce, is sowing the seeds for its demise if this situation is not changed. Research on casualisation of academic labour reveals that those aspiring to be full-time academics often perceive themselves as poorly resourced and excluded from mainstream development activities and opportunities (Coates et al., 2009, Ryan et al., 2011).

Training and Transferable Skills

Table 2 depicts the McDonald's management training structure. What is emphasised in the McDonald's staff development websites is the recognition of transferable skills to other industries. For example, "the skills developed through a Traineeship provide not only a strong foundation for a management career in McDonald's but provide skills for life, and a fantastic foundation for any career path you may choose" (McDonald's, 2011). While the website by the corporation will be biased and naturally uncritical of their career training program, nevertheless, experience as a McDonald's casual is a skill valued by the graduate admission programs in the Australian Public Service and private enterprise (personal communication). The transferability of workplace skills acquired by casual and fulltime staff who undergo the McDonald's training program are transparent to outsiders.

Table 2. McDonald's Management Training Program

Level	Qualification and skills acquired, including transferability attributes
Trainee Manager	Eligible to apply for Certificate III in Retail Management Demonstrate leadership behaviours and people skills to get commitment from crew. Basic supervisory skills and assisting shift managers; training coaching, initiative and innovation skills, workplace safety and food safety.
Second Assistant	Eligible Certificate IV in Retail Management Demonstrate crew training, workplace safety, ordering stock, retention of crew
First Assistant	Eligible to apply for Diploma in Retail Management Demonstrate evaluation of restaurant performance, develop and implement goals and action plans to bring about performance improvements.
Restaurant Manager	Completion of fourth stage of Management Development Program (eligible to apply for Advanced Diploma of Business Management) Responsible for entire restaurant performance. Managing restaurant employees and their development, overseeing operations, meeting sales and profit targets and business planning.

Source: McDonald's Careers (2011)

McDonald's emphasises: "if you've got the drive to develop, then we want to help. Our training and development programs make it easy to see exactly what your options are and how to get there, all while getting paid" (McDonald's, 2011). McDonalds is a registered training organisation and able to issue nationally recognised qualifications. It actively promotes its ability to provide a career path. "Unlike many companies, McDonald's offers a career path to help employees who want to advance. It's easier to stay on track" (McDonald's, 2011).

In contrast to McDonald's claim to provide a career path, the workplace relevant skills acquired by casual academics that are not discipline specific, such as communication, time management, administration and empathy, are arguably not as transparent to employers outside academia. The common perception of academics remains one of an 'ivory tower' disconnection with the 'real' world. For example, a person who has spent five years as a casual tutor would have difficulty convincing a private sector employer of their transferable

skills, compared with a person of equivalent age who has worked as a McDonald's trainee manager. In academia, locked-in casualisation atrophies the worker's perceived transferable skills to those outside of educational and research institutions. Indeed, the real benefits gained through casual or sessional work remain opaque to outsiders. Workplace experience with McDonald's, on the other hand, indicates to outsiders desirable and transferable skills. The McDonald's trademark is in effect a badge of credentialism and transferable skills whereas the experienced casual academic is a badge of irrelevance. Sessional academic teaching experience does not have that badge of authentic transferable skills - indeed it may well be a hindrance. Table 3 compares the career pathways for casuals between McDonald's Corporation and Australian universities. Figure 1 depicts how the McDonald's career pathway is more standardised and linear compared with the sessional academic career pathway, where aspiration to a full-time tenured position is more uncertain.

IV: Conclusion

The result of 'McDonaldization' of higher education has been an increasing similarity between universities and the real McDonalds, quality rules and regulations, cultures of audit, accreditations and accountability, standardisation of programs, more levels of management and surveillance, and increased reliance on cheap and flexible labour. While universities have a long tradition of employing casual tutors, traditionally as academic apprentices but in more recent times as a flexible labour pool used by managers to buffer against fulltime staff shortages, McDonald's is much better than universities in actively managing and nurturing casual staff and providing clearer career pathways, albeit within a rigid framework of standardisation. McDonald's in general provides more secure, better working conditions for its casuals and recognises the value of this human resource to its operations, compared with universities. Therefore, as this paper has argued, the term McDonaldization of higher education is somewhat of a misnomer, while the standardisation of the product has some parallels, other comparisons stop. It is in the management of labour that universities and McDonald's differ the most.

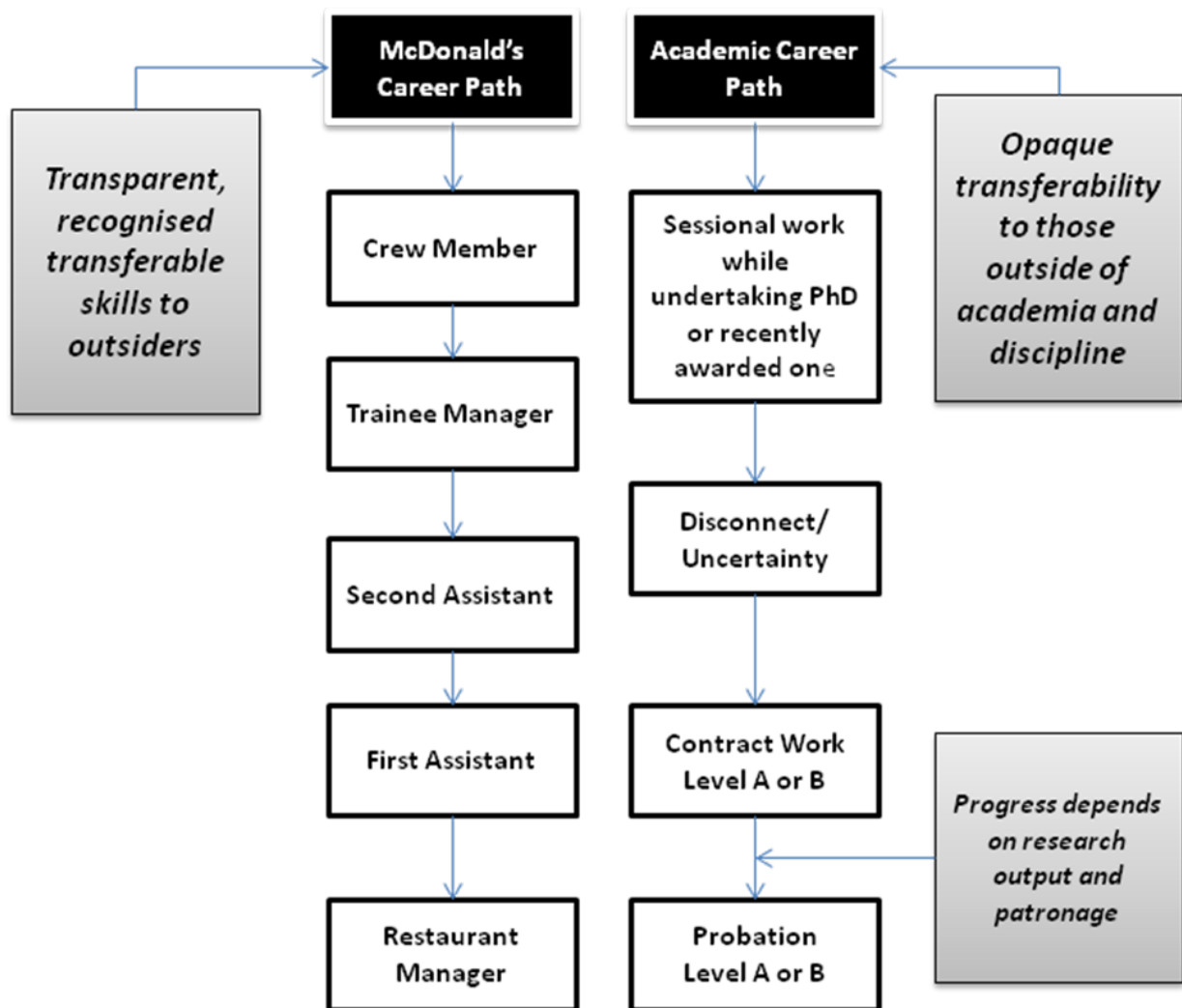
Unlike McDonald's, the challenge for universities is the attempt to walk both sides of the fence. Universities desire to retain academic rigour, independence of thought, and be allowed freedom to be critical of institutions, paradigms and processes. Yet they are also trying to operate as commercial entities and market education as a consumer service. On the other hand, McDonald's is clear of its business which is ultimately to generate profit for shareholders. It sells cheap convenience food, underpinned by a phenomenally successful marketing strategy. It attempts to address its critics' concerns about marketing unhealthy food to children and is trying to allay concerns with acts of corporate social responsibility (e.g. healthier menus, supporting schools sporting programs, and providing play areas in its restaurants). Customers are clear with what McDonald's is and what it stands for. One may be sceptical of McDonald's robust claims of corporate social responsibility and philanthropic acts, but one is left in no doubt that McDonald's ultimate purpose is to make profits. In short, its motives are not muddled. But universities are confused about their motives and purpose and are undergoing an identity crisis that is negatively manifested in the management of sessional academics. In contrast, McDonald's clarity of purpose and long history of reliance on casual labour means that its career pathways and treatment of its adjunct labour force is superior compared to the management style of universities.

Table 3. Comparison of Casual Labour Features for McDonalds & Australian Universities

Mc Donald's Casual	Australian Academic Casual
80% of restaurant managers developed careers starting out as crew members (first step).	<i>Locked-in casualisation:</i> 50% of casuals still casuals after 5 years (May, 2011, Ryan et al., 2011)
Well defined career progression from crew member, crew trainer, trainee manager, second assistant manager, first assistant manager, general manager, regional supervisor.	<i>No defined career path:</i> For those casual academics lucky enough to secure full-time work, it is likely to be in another precarious position either on contract or on probation as a Level A or Level B. Reaching the first rung on an academic career ladder does not guarantee there will be a second rung (Bosworth, 2011)
Transferable skills transparent to outside stakeholders (e.g. public and private sector). McDonald's experience perceived favourable by graduate recruitment agencies.	<i>Non transferable skills:</i> Ivory tower perception. Even transferable skills are opaque to outsiders. The more experience in academic, the less employable.
Complements educational qualifications. For example, in the United States management and training experience at McDonald's can earn up to 46 credit points for a business degree recognised by American Council on Education.	
Recruit and retain talent by emphasising "getting paid while learning".	Non-payment for learning. Casual academics are expected to maintain their stock of skills and nurture human capital at their own time and cost. Sessional teachers are "not paid to develop and maintain their knowledge-base, yet are expected to deploy it in the teaching process" (Brown et al., 2010:172).

Ideally, newer organisational strategies for higher education, with a transformation away from current managerial practices, would be preferable. There should not be the over-reliance on a casualised academic labour force. Sessional academics with appropriate higher degree qualifications and motivation should be given opportunity to become part of the tenured academic community. This would address quality of teaching issues and also address the demographic challenges of an aging academic labour force where retirees are not being replaced with new blood. However, assuming the status quo of neo-liberal economic rationalisation, with educational services remaining a tradeable international commodity, the way forward - at least in the foreseeable future with the current unimaginative political culture - is for universities to wholly embrace the McDonaldization process with respect to providing clear, well developed training and career development programs for their sessional staff. The transferability of skills possessed by causal academics to potential employers outside of academia needs to be made explicit. The current situation, which is a 'halfway' embrace by Australian universities of McDonaldization with respect to product standardisation, but not the staff development of casuals, is ultimately damaging to students, employees and external employer stakeholders.

Figure 1. Comparison of Career Pathways: McDonald's and Australian Universities



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