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Abstract

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HISTORY IN PRACTICE



The university tea room: informal public spaces as ideas incubators

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ABSTRACT

Informal spaces encourage the meeting of minds and the sharing of ideas. They serve as an important counterpoint to the formal, silo-like structures of the modern organisation, encouraging social bonds and discussion across departmental lines. We address the role of one such institution – the university tea room – in Australia in the post-WWII decades. Drawing on a series of oral history interviews with economic historians, we examine the nature of the tea room space, demonstrate its effects on research within universities, and analyse the causes and implications of its decline in recent decades.

KEYWORDS

Intellectual history;
Australian universities; ideas
exchange; tea rooms;
Australian economic history

The tea room at the ANU is no longer what it was. They all burrow away, they all work in their own houses or in archives, and they come in at most once a week. It's no longer the hub it once was, it was a real hive.

(Graeme Davison, 7 July 2015)

Introduction

During the rapid post-WWII expansion of universities, the academic tea room became popular as a convivial meeting place that built friendships, and facilitated the exchange of knowledge and the sharing of expertise. In some cases it provided the foundation for longer-term projects. Tea room gatherings, however, also strengthened existing hierarchies through group identity-building and the reinforcement of decision-making processes. Rather than embracing diverse views, tea rooms at times consolidated formal leadership, cliques, and majority perspectives to the exclusion of those holding alternative views or coming from different demographic groups.

The following provides a history of the tea room in Australian universities which draws upon the recollections of the scholars who frequented them. We argue that a series of factors, including government support and a young male workforce, drove

expansion of the university tea room from the 1950s. Little more than three decades later, however, shifts in government policy and the demographics of the academic workforce, and the rise of modern information technology contributed to the tea room's demise. Our paper analyses the role of these informal spaces in the development of knowledge, the implications of the tea room space for collegiality and research projects, and whether senior scholars are justified in bemoaning its decline in recent decades.

The role of informal spaces in the generation of knowledge

Tea rooms (sometimes referred to as staff common rooms) were an influential institution within post-war Australian universities. They were informal spaces that enabled communication among a broad range of scholars, complementing the more structured departmental conversations that dominated the rest of the university landscape. As some sociologists have argued, such informal spaces play a key role in the development of ideas. A social-deterministic perspective of intellectual history argues that research is rarely produced in a vacuum, and that ideas are inherently tied to the context in which they are produced. A common workplace – like a university – involves a variety of activities which encourage interaction amongst staff (in this case scholars),¹ and the communication they facilitate can be a key vehicle through which ideas grow and develop.²

Different types of joint activities lead to different forms of communication, with a greater investment of time, effort, and emotion leading to intense communication and 'strong' ties between members. Intense relationships facilitate communication by generating trust, shared norms, and accountability.³ It also means that those with strong ties will generally have very similar ideas.⁴ Activities with lower emotional or time investment, larger group size, or less frequent interactions, however, produce weaker ties between members. Although weak ties are associated with lower trust and fewer common values, these activities allow participation

¹S. L. Feld, 'The Focused Organisation of Social Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 86, no. 5 (1981): 1015–35.

²D. Crane, *Invisible Colleges: Diffusion of Knowledge in Scientific Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); M. J. Mulkay, G. N. Gilbert, and S. Woolgar, 'Problem Areas and Research Networks in Science', *Sociology* 9, no. 1 (1975): 187–203; N. C. Mullins, *Theory and Theory Groups in Contemporary American Sociology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); Richard Whitley, *The Intellectual and Social Organisation of the Sciences* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); P. Mirowski, *More Heat than Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³Ronald S. Burt, 'The Network Structure of Social Capital', *Research in Organisational Behaviour* 22, no. 1 (2000): 345–423; J. S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); C. Millar and C. J. Choi, 'Networks, Social Norms and Knowledge Sub-networks', *Journal of Business Ethics* 90, no. 1 (2009): 565–74; J. Nahapiet and S. Ghoshal, 'Social Capital, Intellectual Capital, and the Organisational Advantage', *The Academy of Management Review* 23, no. 2 (1998): 242–66; J. Nieves and J. Osorio, 'The Role of Social Networks in Knowledge Creation', *Knowledge Management Research and Practice* 11, no. 1 (2013): 62–77; Whitley, *Organisation of the Sciences*; R. Reagans and B. McEvily, 'Network Structure and Knowledge Transfer: The Effects of Cohesion and Range', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2003): 240–67; K. Rost, 'The Strength of Strong Ties in the Creation of Innovation', *Research Policy* 40, no. 4 (2011): 588–604.

⁴Mark Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–80; R. Katz and T. J. Allen, 'Investigating the Not Invented Here (NIH) Syndrome', *R&D Management* 12, no. 1 (1982): 7–19; Millar and Choi, 'Networks'.

from a more diverse group of participants. Less overlap in the background and experience of individuals means these weaker ties increase the diversity of knowledge in a group.⁵ In an academic setting, this may be associated with intellectual innovation.

There is no scholarly consensus on the optimum workplace configuration for the production of knowledge. Strong ties facilitate communication, but weak ties increase the production of new ideas. New knowledge first requires the innovative benefits of weak ties, but the value of this knowledge – through refining it, reproducing it, and applying it to other contexts – is then best pursued through the strong ties of the disciplinary ‘tribe’.⁶ The two structures can be considered complementary, with a combination of clusters of strong ties, with bridging ties to other clusters, argued to be beneficial for a research domain.⁷ Similarly, different activities within large organisations are complementary, offering different qualities to the production and dissemination of knowledge. The influence of joint activities is also historically contingent, with technology, demographics, and research cultures affecting the degree to which common activities develop research agendas in a group.⁸

The university tea room is one of a number of historical examples of informal discussion spaces centred around drinking beverages. The coffeehouses of early modern Europe, for example, provided public spaces for the sharing of ideas. Those of Paris and Vienna were particularly known for their creative role amongst the intelligentsia of those cities.⁹ Some of the coffee houses of eighteenth-century London attracted a more commercial clientele. Famously, though not the first of its kind, the London coffeehouse of Edward Lloyd (est. 1754) provided the opportunity for individual ship-owners, insurers, and merchants to meet, share information about the state of trade, and initiate new business.¹⁰ However, these were open to anyone willing to buy a cup

⁵Granovetter’s work in this area is seminal: Granovetter, ‘Strength of Weak Ties’. See also R. Burt, *Structural Holes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); J. M. Podolny and J. N. Baron, ‘Resources and Relationships: Social Networks and Mobility in the Workplace’, *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 5 (1997): 673–93; C. Wang, S. Rodan, M. Fruin, and X. Xu, ‘Knowledge Networks, Collaboration Networks and Exploratory Innovation’, *Academy of Management Journal* 57, no. 2 (2014): 484–514.

⁶T. Becher and P. R. Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines* (Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education, Open University Press, [1989] 2001); Burt, *Structural Holes*; Burt, ‘Social Capital’; A. Montanari and A. Saberi, ‘The Spread of Innovations in Social Networks’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107, no. 47 (2010): 20196–201; Nieves and Osorio, ‘Role of Social Networks’; Reagans and McEvily, ‘Network Structure’; Rost, ‘Strength of Strong Ties’.

⁷See Stanley Milgram, ‘The Small-World Problem’, *Psychology Today* 1, no. 5 (1967): 62–67 for paradigmatic work on this issue.

⁸Gordon Boyce, ‘Communicating Infrastructures’, in *How Organisations Connect: Investing in Communication*, ed. Gordon Boyce, Stuart Macintyre, and Simon Ville (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 8–31; Erwin Dekker, *The Viennese Students of Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Claire Wright, ‘The 1920s Viennese Intellectual Community as a Centre for Ideas Exchange: A Network Analysis’, *History of Political Economy* 48, no. 4 (2016): 593–634; Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁹Earlene Craver, ‘The Emigration of the Austrian Economists’, *History of Political Economy* 18, no. 1 (1986): 1–32; Gabrielle Robinson and Mike Keen, ‘Cafe Kultur: The Coffeehouses of Vienna’, *Contemporary Review* 269, no. 1566 (1996): 1–24; Lewis A. Coser, *Men of Ideas: A Sociologist’s View* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

¹⁰Hyder Abbas, ‘“A Fund of Entertaining and Useful Information”: Coffee Houses, Early Public Libraries, and the Print Trade in Eighteenth-Century Dublin’, *Library & Information History* 30, no. 1 (2014): 41–61; Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2004); Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Anthony Wild, *Coffee, A Dark History* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004); A. Cameron and R. Farndon, *Scenes from Sea and City: Lloyds List, 1734–1984* (Colchester: Lloyds of London Press, 1984).

of coffee and therefore lacked the intersecting knowledge and shared professional etiquette of the university tea room.

Perhaps more akin to our case were the informal spaces inhabited by groups of intellectuals. London's Bloomsbury group of the early twentieth century, and the interwar Viennese intellectuals, are examples of communities built around informal discussion circles hosted at private residences.¹¹ Membership was exclusive, almost secretive, and generally involved much smaller numbers than public coffeehouses. Nevertheless, members came from art, literature, public service, and the university, with discussions ranging from research to political issues to larger philosophical questions. Voluntary involvement, and the incorporation of a range of perspectives, contributed to diverse knowledge in these fora. However, these groups were much more closely connected through kinship and social circles. Like patrons of coffee houses, they did not interact as part of a particular workplace.

Alongside the development of coffeehouses and discussion circles throughout the modern era ran the expansion of university training and research.¹² Within universities, a variety of activities exist to foster connections between scholars. These are generally organised along departmental lines and encourage participation amongst members of the disciplinary tribe.¹³ Seminars, for example, have been a major form of research-based discussion within departments.¹⁴ Hierarchies are enforced through the formality of proceedings, the recognition of senior scholars, and the promotion of influential research projects. Seminars thus often generate strong ties between scholars. PhD supervision generally fosters connections between students and supervisors. Here too compulsory interactions, the imbalance of power, and the matching of students with supervisors in similar areas of expertise mean that this activity generates intense interactions.¹⁵ Committee meetings, and even one-on-one discussions, also reinforce pre-existing connections, as they are formal and have a specific agenda or outcome. Though important for fostering disciplinary identity and focussing discussions, these activities lack the serendipity and informality conducive to generating new, unexpected connections. Tea rooms, we argue, have fulfilled this vital role within Australia's university landscape.

This paper examines the tea room experience of Australian universities in the second half of the twentieth century, focussing on their role in the exchange of

¹¹Crauford D. Goodwin, 'The Bloomsbury Group as Creative Community', *History of Political Economy* 43, no. 1 (2011): 59–82; Robert Leonard, 'The Collapse of Interwar Vienna: Oskar Morgenstern's Community, 1925–50', *History of Political Economy* 43, no. 1 (2011): 83–130; Claire Wright, 'The 1920s Viennese Intellectual Community'; Earlene Craver, 'The Emigration of the Austrian Economists', *History of Political Economy* 18, no. 1 (1986): 1–32.

¹²Hermann Röhrs, 'The Classical Idea of the University', in *Tradition and Reform of the University under an International Perspective*, ed. Hermann Röhrs and Gerhard Hess (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1987).

¹³See Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) for discussion of the way in which the activities of universities reinforce the dominance of disciplines.

¹⁴The seminar has occupied a central place in the modern university, see Röhrs, 'The Classical Idea'. See also the discussion of departmental seminars and tea rooms later in this article.

¹⁵A. Collins, J. S. Brown, and S. E. Newman, 'Cognitive Apprenticeship: Teaching the Crafts', in *Knowing, Learning and Instruction*, ed. Lauren B. Resnik (Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1989), 453–94; A. Lee, 'How Are Doctoral Students Supervised? Concepts of Doctoral Research Supervision', *Studies in Higher Education* 33, no. 3 (2008): 267–81; M. Pearson and A. Brew, 'Research Training and Supervision Development', *Studies in Higher Education* 27, no. 2 (2002): 135–50.

ideas and expertise that enabled scholarship to flourish. Several previous studies have investigated social and cultural aspects (demeanour, codes of behaviour) of communal tea drinking in Australian society.¹⁶ However, we are not aware of any work that has specifically looked at organisational tea rooms and their role in the production of knowledge in Australia. Neither has any research been located on overseas universities where tea rooms were known to have existed.¹⁷

Our approach is based around a series of oral history interviews with academics from the interdisciplinary field of economic history. Interviews were conducted as part of a larger study into the development of the economic history field in the post-WWII decades.¹⁸ The strong growth of this field and the importance of cross-disciplinary discussion for research in economic history make this an appropriate group with which to illuminate the nature and effect of informal spaces such as tea rooms. Most participants were key members of the economic history group in the post-WWII decades, including those who held appointments, conducted research, and/or were involved in the main journal or society. Several participants were primarily members of adjacent disciplines, but were included due to their substantial interaction with the economic history group. As with any interdisciplinary field, the boundaries of this group are permeable.¹⁹

Oral history provides access to undocumented experiences of people who have participated in, or observed, past events.²⁰ It can recreate the multiplicity of stand-points inherent in any historical moment, can fill gaps in knowledge, and can reaffirm or challenge the validity of received wisdom. In our case particularly, the paucity of written records for university tea rooms means oral history sources are invaluable for understanding the influence of these spaces on the development of knowledge in Australian universities. While oral history sources are unique and dynamic, they are also intrinsically subjective. Interviewees may repress, misremember, or distort memories for personal, political, or social reasons.²¹ Individuals tend to disproportionately remember events from early adulthood, or those that seem in retrospect to have had an impact on their life.²² Memories may also be distorted as time progresses and the values held by the interviewee change.²³ The interviewer

¹⁶Susie Khamis, 'A Taste for Tea: How Tea Travelled to (and through) Australian Culture', *Journal of the History of Culture in Australia* 24, no. 1 (2006): 57–80; Jessica Knight, 'A Poisonous Cup? Afternoon Tea in Australian Society, 1870–1914' (Honours thesis, University of Sydney, 2011); Melissa Dive, 'Steeped in History: Afternoon Tea at Vaucluse House', *Ideas in History* 4, no. 2 (2014).

¹⁷Pincus and Schedvin recall tea rooms in the US and UK, respectively.

¹⁸Claire Wright, 'Occupying the Interdisciplinary Space: A Visualisation of Australia's Economic History Field, 1950–1991' (PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 2017).

¹⁹For a more detailed discussion of the methodology and findings for the oral history project, see Claire Wright and Simon Ville, 'The Evolution of an Intellectual Community through the Words of its Founders: Recollections of Australia's Economic History Field', *Australian Economic History Review* 57, no. 3 (2017): 345–67.

²⁰A. Thomson, 'Anzac Memories', in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 343–352.

²¹*Ibid.*; A. Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 32–42.

²²E. Roy Weintraub, 'Autobiographical Memory and the Historiography of Economics', *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 27, no. 1 (2005): 1–11.

²³P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1978] 2000); Thomson, 'Anzac Memories'.

too has an effect through their choice of hypotheses, the gaps in their research agenda, and interpersonal factors such as dress, speech, manners, gender, class, age, race, ethnicity, or ideology.²⁴

In our case, oral history interviews focussed on the professional and social networks of the individuals, their approach to the subject, the development of the Australian economic history community, and the link between economic history and other groups. Tea rooms were not an explicit part of the original oral history agenda. This theme emerged organically, with several interviewees indicating the importance of this institution for their research. Following this, all interviewees were approached again via email or phone for their recollections of tea rooms. A mixture of oral and written testimony forms the basis of the discussion that follows.²⁵

While these recollections provide a rare insight into the nature and effect of these informal activities, they reflect the views of a particular demographic group. As was the case in the broader economic history community at the time, the vast majority of interviewees were young males between the ages of 25 and 45 in the post-WWII decades. This sample likely imbued recollections of the tea room with a considerable amount of nostalgia.²⁶ Indulgence of the tea room's patriarchal rituals and lamentation of the decline of the space in recent decades may be attributed to this. We have sought to balance these oral history sources by adopting a critical lens, and verifying their testimony with written sources where possible.

God Professors and tea ladies: the expansion of tea rooms in Australian universities

While other informal gatherings existed on campus, such as lunches and drinks at the bar, the tea room was a regular and popular meeting place for most scholars. Early instances of this institution may have appeared in wartime, according to Stuart Macintyre, with Melbourne's History Department tea room established 'no later than 1940'.²⁷ Morning tea was a part of the ANU from its establishment in 1946, with Noel Butlin and Gus Sinclair recalling that, in the very early days of the ANU, there was a single tea room in the old hospital building (see Figure 1).²⁸

²⁴Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History'; R. J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent, 1991); Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Valerie Yow, "'Do I Like Them Too Much?': Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa', *The Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (1997): 55–79.

²⁵Relevant interviews for this analysis were those with Pat Troy, David Merrett, Stuart Macintyre, Gus Sinclair, Alan Hall, Boris Schedvin, Tony Dingle and Graeme Davison (interviewed together), Bob Jackson, Hector 'Mac' Boot, and Pamela Statham. Follow-up correspondence from Troy, Merrett, Macintyre, Hall, Davison, Statham, Jonathan Pincus, and Selwyn Cornish is incorporated. A follow-up phone call with Schedvin is also included.

²⁶Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994); Weintraub, 'Autobiographical Memory'.

²⁷Macintyre correspondence.

²⁸Sinclair interview; Stephen Foster, *Interview with Emeritus Professor Noel George Butlin* (Canberra: ANU Oral History Archive, 1991).



Figure 1. Entrance to the RSSS tea room in the buildings of the Old Canberra Hospital, 1957.

Caption (from source): Staff and scholars in the Research School have a beer outside the tea room, about 1957. Left to right: Noel Butlin (supporting the verandah), Ross Martin (Political Science), Don Rawson (Political Science), David Packer (Demography), Warren Hogan (Economics), A.J. Catt (Economics) and Ted Hannan (Statistics). By courtesy of Joan Butlin.

Source: S. G. Foster and M. M. Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 103.

The expansion of the tea room tradition grew alongside Australia's higher education sector. In the post-WWII decades, tertiary student numbers increased, promoted by post-war reconstruction, returned servicemen schemes, greater professionalisation of occupations, and wider societal change.²⁹ Governments and universities emphasised research capacity, with the establishment of domestic PhD programmes and a greater integration of research funding and national priorities.³⁰ In 1957, the Menzies government published the Murray Report, which provided the framework upon which a new national higher education sector was built. It recommended the establishment of new universities and a closer relationship between universities, public needs, and the government.³¹

²⁹D. S. Anderson and E. Eaton, 'Australian Higher Education Research and Society: Part 1: Post-War Reconstruction and Expansion 1940–1965', *Higher Education Research and Development* 1, no. 1 (1982): 8–93; Hannah Forsyth, *A History of the Modern Australian University* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2014); Stuart Macintyre, *The Poor Relation* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010).

³⁰Forsyth, *Modern Australian University*.

³¹Keith Murray, Ian Clunies Ross, Charles R. Morris, Alex Reid, and J. C. Richards, *Report of the Committee on Australian Universities* (Canberra: Commonwealth Government Printer, 1957); Forsyth, *Modern Australian University*.

The growing popularity of the university tea room was enshrined in Australia's higher education policy through the Murray Report. The committee agreed on the vital role played by informal spaces in developing ideas and collegiality:

An essential point of university life is that teachers and researchers in different disciplines should meet constantly and informally; this is necessary to maintain the essential cohesiveness and fellow-feeling in the teaching body, and it immensely fortifies and vitalizes ideas and enterprise in the work of original research.³²

The committee particularly recognised the importance of such spaces in encouraging cross-disciplinary discussion, acknowledging that despite growing disciplinary loyalties, university staff 'remain as good as ever [...] at encouraging, assisting and re-vitalizing one another across the boundaries of their special studies'.³³ The Murray Report commented that the University of Melbourne offered an early paragon for the tea room space, and recommended that similar spaces be established at every university.

Universities followed through, establishing tea rooms throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. At the University of Sydney, the new Mereweather Building (home of the Economics Faculty) was opened in 1966 and included a 'large staff common room for morning and afternoon tea'.³⁴ At Flinders University, the School of Social Sciences established a 'common room committee' in 1974, and cited earlier use of the space for morning and afternoon tea, and lunch.³⁵ Memos relating to the Flinders tea room committee indicate that the common room was considered an important opportunity for staff to interact informally. At Monash, memos to staff in the Faculty of Economics and Politics (ECOPS) indicate that the tea room was well-frequented.³⁶

The growth of the tea room was likely encouraged by the shifting demographics of the academic workforce. The 1950s and 1960s saw a booming academic labour market, as the growth of students outpaced graduates sufficiently qualified to take up university posts. The result was full academic employment, with recruitment from overseas (particularly the UK), and the employment of part-time teaching staff who had careers in other sectors. The post-war glut of students translated, over time, to a greater supply of university staff. By the 1970s, staff were generally recent male graduates in their twenties and thirties, employed on a full-time basis.³⁷ The demographic homogeneity created by age-heaping in younger groups and gender concentration likely fostered a sense of camaraderie and may have encouraged participation in informal rituals such as the tea room.

Oral history interviewees recall consistent participation in tea rooms at the universities of Melbourne, Monash, ANU, Flinders, Western Australia, Adelaide, and Sydney throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.³⁸ Although not an exclusively

³²Ibid., 57.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Peter Groenewegen, *Educating for Business, Public Service and the Social Sciences: A History of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Sydney 1920–1999* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009), 104.

³⁵See Flinders University Archives Collection, Bedford Park, School of Social Sciences Common Room Committee, memo dated 25 July 1974.

³⁶See Monash University Archives, Clayton, Faculty of Economics and Politics memo dated 22 February 1980.

³⁷Graeme Hugo, 'Demographic Trends in Australia's Academic Workforce', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 27, no. 3 (2005): 327–43.

³⁸Some interviewees also remembered staff clubs as important informal spaces for members of the whole university. Macintyre, Davison correspondence.

Australian custom,³⁹ regular, even daily, attendance at morning tea was an expectation,⁴⁰ and has been referred to as a 'convention' and a 'ritual'.⁴¹ Part of this practice involved scholars engaging in discussion beyond their own disciplinary tribe. Graeme Davison has recalled that the ideal of the University of Melbourne Arts tea room was 'a kind of salon where one conversed intelligently and wittily on topics of general intellectual interest'.⁴² Most scholars believed that tea rooms fostered engagement with those from different groups – the 'creatures from another world'.⁴³ Maddock has recalled that, in the ANU Coombs building tea room, 'you would be sitting at a table with a sociologist, an urban planner, and someone from history of thought ... Talking about ideas, and what was going on'.⁴⁴ This characteristic was built into the expected behaviours of the ANU Coombs building space, in particular:

There had been a tradition that when you went into that room, you sat in an empty seat. It didn't matter who else was at the table. You were expected to engage with people from different disciplines. That was supposed to be one way of keeping a cross-disciplinary conversation going. By and large it worked very well.⁴⁵

Interviewees remember the physical space of the tea room fondly, arguing the configuration was conducive to cross-disciplinary discussion. In some cases, the tea room existed very literally at the junction of different disciplinary territories.⁴⁶ Spaces were often quite large, comprising half or a whole floor of the building.⁴⁷ At Flinders, morning tea was held in a 'splendid large room, with much natural light'.⁴⁸ Morning tea in the Coombs building at the ANU was also held in a 'bright sunny room', with Sidney Nolan's celebrated 'River Bend' paintings dominating one wall.⁴⁹ Tables were small, holding between five and eight people at each.⁵⁰ Melbourne also had small tables, seating perhaps three or four, and 'easy chairs around low coffee tables'.⁵¹ Tea in the Monash ECOPS faculty was similar, indeed inspired by the Melbourne model, with small tables and a variety of seating configurations.⁵² The social architecture of tea rooms – large, pleasant spaces with small tables – promoted the informality of the space while also encouraging discussion across disciplinary lines by breaking up large departmental groups.⁵³

³⁹Pincus has remembered tea rooms at the universities of Stanford and Virginia in the US, and Schedvin has recalled the 'elegant tea room' at the London School of Economics. Pincus correspondence; Schedvin phone.

⁴⁰Implicit expectation: Macintyre correspondence; Merrett correspondence; Maddock interview; Schedvin phone. Some have argued that it was compulsory, see Statham correspondence.

⁴¹Maddock; Troy interviews.

⁴²Davison correspondence.

⁴³Merrett correspondence. Dingle/Davison; Boot; Jackson interviews; Schedvin phone makes this point as well.

⁴⁴Maddock interview.

⁴⁵Troy interview. See also Pincus correspondence.

⁴⁶The Coombs tea room was located between the Social Science and Pacific Studies Research Schools. Brij V. Lal and Allison Ley, ed., *The Coombs: A House of Memories* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2006), 259. At Flinders, similarly, the Social Sciences tea room was 'on the crossover passage from one part of the floor to another', see Pincus correspondence.

⁴⁷Schedvin phone, for Sydney, Melbourne, Monash. Macintyre correspondence for Melbourne. Pincus correspondence for Flinders.

⁴⁸Pincus correspondence.

⁴⁹Davison; Pincus correspondence.

⁵⁰Troy interview; Macintyre; Davison; Pincus correspondence; Schedvin phone.

⁵¹Davison correspondence. See also Macintyre; Merrett correspondence; Schedvin phone.

⁵²Merrett; Davison correspondence; Schedvin phone.

⁵³Troy interview; Merrett correspondence.

Tea rooms were a place to develop social bonds and conduct the administrative matters of the university. Macintyre has likened the institution to office hours, commenting that ‘when you visited Canberra, you could always turn up at 11 or 4 and find the person you were looking for’. While much of the discussion was about current events and research, teaching and administrative matters were also covered.⁵⁴ Jackson and Cornish have remembered the development of personal connections through the ANU Faculties tea room, as has Hall for the Coombs tea room.⁵⁵ Merrett has argued that, at Monash, ‘discussions were about anything and everything, personal to academic, as those you worked with were your friends as well as colleagues’.⁵⁶ Discussions of the Australian Football League (AFL) naturally featured heavily in the Melbourne-based universities.⁵⁷ At the Economics and Commerce tea room at the University of Adelaide, talk centred on ‘social life and sports and bird watching’.⁵⁸

While providing an informal location for broad and constructive interaction, tea rooms may have reinforced existing hierarchies. Seating was structured by seniority in some cases.⁵⁹ Scholars have recalled the influence of ‘God Professors’ who ‘presided’, or held ‘centre stage’, over tea rooms.⁶⁰ This element has been remembered invariably while interviewees were junior members of staff – some have recalled a sense of awe in the tea room space, and likened it to a spectator sport. Younger staff were ‘expected to listen, occasionally invited to contribute’.⁶¹ Merrett has argued that Monash economists such as Fred Gruen, Joe Isaac, and Don Cochrane ‘would come in at morning tea and you’d just listen to them argue’.⁶² Macintyre similarly has recalled that at Melbourne, typical small conversations would ‘join when exuberant personalities held forth’.⁶³ Inga Clendinnen, also recalling the Melbourne Arts tea room, commented: ‘You were invited to test yourself [...] it was the tea room that showed people going through their paces’.⁶⁴ Davison has reinforced the competition metaphor, arguing that:

Proficiency in this form of intellectual sport tended to reside with the most experienced players, the senior members with the largest store of intellectual capital to deploy.⁶⁵

Interactions may have reflected existing tensions between groups. As a place of diverse intellectual exchange and ‘contested ideas’, occasionally interactions were unpleasant.⁶⁶ Merrett has recalled an instance where the department’s God Professor,

⁵⁴Macintyre; Merrett correspondence; Schedvin phone.

⁵⁵Jackson interview; Cornish; Hall correspondence.

⁵⁶Merrett correspondence.

⁵⁷Schedvin phone; Davison correspondence.

⁵⁸Pincus correspondence.

⁵⁹Macintyre correspondence.

⁶⁰Cochrane and Gruen for Monash ECOPS, see Dingle/Davison interview; Graeme Davison and Kate Murphy, *University Unlimited: The Monash Story* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012), 69. Max Crawford, John La Nauze, and Kathleen Fitzpatrick for Melbourne, see Davison correspondence. Butlin has been recalled as important in enforcing ANU tea room discussions, see Schedvin interview.

⁶¹Macintyre correspondence. Statham and Pincus have made similar points about the University of Western Australia (UWA) and Adelaide tea rooms, respectively.

⁶²Merrett interview.

⁶³Macintyre correspondence.

⁶⁴‘First Discussion Session’, in *Max Crawford’s School of History*, ed. Stuart Macintyre and Peter McPhee (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2000), 33–39.

⁶⁵Davison interview.

⁶⁶Merrett; Pincus correspondence.

John McCarty, had to ‘stand up’ for the economic history group, after an ‘abrasive young man’ questioned the legitimacy of the field of study. Schedvin was aware of tension between the orthodox and political economists at the University of Sydney in the early 1970s, and believes this may have spilled over into the tea room space.⁶⁷

The hierarchical nature of the tea room began to change over time, however, as several scholars have noted. Macintyre and Statham have contrasted the serious atmosphere at Melbourne and the University of Western Australia (UWA) in the 1960s, with more relaxed gatherings in the 1980s.⁶⁸ Davison has similarly argued that, at Melbourne, the 1960s Oxbridge model of intellectual exchange gave way to more personal interaction by the 1980s. He noted, ‘the conversation seems less inhibited (or perhaps it’s just I’m less inhibited myself).’⁶⁹

Similar to coffeehouses, metaphors of competition reinforced the inherent masculinity of university tea rooms. Butlin has likened the space to the other ‘blokey’ social activities at the ANU, commenting that, ‘We all – or not all but a lot of us – broke off in the middle of the day or even in the middle of the morning to play tennis at designated times. We had a very active cricket team. We all went to the tea room, of course, together’. Pincus has recalled the ‘depressing’ masculinity of the University of Adelaide economics tea room:

The walls displayed photos of leading Departmental male academics dressed in their (Australian Rules) ‘footie’ attire or cricket or running attire; one photo showed a male academic, in proprietorial fashion, with his arms around the shoulders of the four ‘girls’ who were the admin staff.⁷⁰

Participation was largely restricted to permanent academic staff, and the dominance of men in such positions contributed to a male-dominated tea room culture. There was very little involvement from the long-term, largely female, administrative staff and research assistants who helped shape the work of their colleagues. Involvement from administrative staff has been remembered at Murdoch, but this appears to be exceptional.⁷¹ Pincus has criticised this element of the University of Adelaide tea room: ‘It was remarkable—and I put an end to this—that the general staff (all female) were excluded for 30 minutes, for the academics’ morning and afternoon teatimes.’⁷² Pincus was alone in his recognition of, and action against, the masculinity of the tea room. Reflecting the demographics of our sample, respondents generally held a nostalgic view of the sharing of knowledge amongst the (largely) male academic staff, rarely raising the exclusion of the large female workforce employed in professional roles or in the tea room itself.

Organisation of the tea room varied. In some cases, it was arranged, free of charge, by the faculty. In others, it was a paid subscription, very much like a ‘club’.⁷³ Some

⁶⁷Schedvin interview.

⁶⁸Macintyre; Statham correspondence.

⁶⁹Davison correspondence.

⁷⁰Pincus correspondence.

⁷¹Macintyre correspondence.

⁷²Pincus correspondence.

⁷³For instance, at Flinders University, subscription to the tea room service was deducted from fortnightly pay. See Flinders University Archives Collection, DH/2/0, memo dated 12 June 1974.

groups employed a ‘tea lady’ and others were self-service.⁷⁴ At Monash, ECOPS faculty records indicate that responsibility for the tea room was passed amongst staff.⁷⁵ Merrett’s recollections support this, commenting that he was appointed to run the tea room as a junior member of faculty at Monash, though ‘Lil [Walker] really ran the place’.⁷⁶ De-formalisation of the tea room over time increased the incidence of ‘self-serve’ routines. This may have created tension with the administrative staff, who were expected to clean up after the academics in lieu of a dedicated ‘tea lady’.⁷⁷

What is clear from oral and written testimony is that no two tea rooms were the same. Interactions were structured by the configuration of faculties and university buildings. Noel Butlin and Gus Sinclair have recalled that the original ANU tea room in the old hospital building meant scholars from the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities were ‘thrown together’.⁷⁸ When the group was moved into part of the medical school in the late 1950s, they then developed close relationships – through the tea room – with scholars from medicine.⁷⁹ Walsh for the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS) geography department, and Jackson, Boot, and Cornish for the Faculties, have also commented that involvement of scholars in the tea room was contingent on the configuration of the particular building.⁸⁰ At Monash and the University of Sydney, scholars had much greater contact with those in political science, who were part of the same faculties as the economic historians.⁸¹ Schedvin has argued that the configuration of faculties limited their contact with historians, that ‘they were in a separate part of the building, so you didn’t mingle on a daily basis to the same degree. There wasn’t a tea room [with them]’.⁸²

In addition to becoming more relaxed over time, there were also differences in the atmosphere of each tea room. Jackson has distinguished between the (largely) social gatherings in the Faculties, and the ‘much more professional, much more earnest’ forum for those in the ANU research schools. Statham has noted the formality of the UWA tea room, commenting that attendance was compulsory, and that rather than using small tables, ‘everyone sat in a big round circle balancing tea cups on chair arms’.⁸³ Macintyre and Davison have compared Melbourne’s ‘very serious event’ and more informal approaches elsewhere.⁸⁴

Despite such differences, the key elements of university tea rooms remained relatively stable. For those employed as full-time academics, tea room conversations were an important activity for the development of contacts and ideas. The informality of the space, the tendency for intimate discussion, and the participation of those from

⁷⁴Monash and Coombs building had a tea lady, see Merrett; Hall; Davison correspondence. Self-serve: Murdoch, see Macintyre correspondence.

⁷⁵See Monash University Archives, Faculty of Economics and Politics memo dated 22 February 1980.

⁷⁶Merrett correspondence.

⁷⁷Davison correspondence.

⁷⁸Sinclair interview; Foster, *Interview with Butlin*.

⁷⁹Foster, *Interview with Butlin*.

⁸⁰Jackson; Boot; Cornish interviews. Stephen Foster, *Interview with Gerald Patrick Walsh* (Canberra: ANU Oral History Archive, 1994).

⁸¹Schedvin phone.

⁸²Schedvin interview.

⁸³Statham correspondence.

⁸⁴Macintyre contrasted Melbourne with Murdoch University; Davison with Monash.

different disciplines fostered diverse intellectual exchange. Whereas departmental seminars encouraged strong ties and discussion amongst those in the ‘tribe’,⁸⁵ the tea room extended conversations across disciplinary groups. Tea rooms contributed to the overall university landscape by encouraging innovative ‘bridging’ ties that complemented the strong ties within each department.

Innovation, collaboration, and career trajectories

While the tea room may not have been the vehicle of democracy and equity that some may have recollected, it was clearly remembered as a valuable receptacle for networking and building collaborations both within and between groups. Tea room discussions may have bolstered interactions at the departmental level. Merrett has argued that, due to infrequent department meetings, discussions over morning tea formed the bulk of the Monash economic history group’s communication:

We all knew what our colleagues were doing, we had real-time conversations through the process from first ideas to publication ... We had a shared sense of identity, we were the ‘Monash economic history group’, we wanted everyone to do well.⁸⁶

The informality of the tea room space contributed to social ties between those in different disciplines. Friendships forged through the tea room made it much easier to approach scholars from other disciplines for help. Jackson has argued that ‘once you are friendly, comfortable with someone, you can ask them anything. Nobody minds if you knock on their door and say, “look, what the heck is this?”’⁸⁷

Informal discussions contributed to intellectually creative environments. Pincus has noted that ‘generally, the best tea rooms for me were in places that ... had a tradition of vigorous but mostly respectful contention’.⁸⁸ The atmosphere of tea rooms has been described as ‘lively’⁸⁹ and ‘exciting’.⁹⁰ Although the mix of disciplines undoubtedly fostered disagreement, wide-ranging discussions have been described as necessary for the study of economic history.⁹¹ This field flourishes in the empty spaces between the humanities and social sciences, and by reaching beyond their small, niche group, tea room interactions meant economic historians were able to integrate knowledge from different areas into their work. Schedvin has noted that tea room discussions increased his exposure to those in the accounting group, Merrett has commented that he ‘learnt a huge amount’ from discussions with economists, and Davison has recalled that, during his time as a PhD student at the ANU, tea room discussions ‘really did have a significant effect on the sort of work I was able to do’.⁹²

⁸⁵ At the ANU, seminar records indicate that from the 1960s to the 1980s, most presenters were Canberra-based members of the economic history field. See Australian National University Archives (ANUA), Canberra, 62/113; 115; 117; 126; 129; 230–310. Oral history interviews with scholars from the ANU, Monash, Melbourne, and UNSW confirm the ‘closed’ nature of most economic history seminars: Cornish, McLean, Statham, Dingle/Davison, Nicholas, Blainey, Hall, Schedvin interviews.

⁸⁶ Merrett correspondence.

⁸⁷ Jackson interview.

⁸⁸ Pincus correspondence.

⁸⁹ Dingle/Davison; Sinclair interview; Schedvin phone.

⁹⁰ Boot interview.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Schedvin phone; Merrett interview; Dingle/Davison interview.

This forum may also have mitigated a sense of isolation. In the 1960s and 1970s, as universities expanded and faculties and departments became larger, groups were divided into narrower thematic denominations.⁹³ By reaching beyond departmental lines, tea rooms moderated the effect of institutional fragmentation.⁹⁴ Research-only positions at the RSSS may have also increased the participation in, but also the necessity for, these informal interactions.⁹⁵ Alan Hall has observed that, after the division of the RSSS into individual departments in the early 1960s, the tea room enabled him to maintain contact with members of the economic history group.⁹⁶ Pincus has argued that, for the Social Sciences tea room at Flinders, the open plan, light-filled space, and informal discussion contributed to a 'sense of joint enterprise' and 'common purpose'.⁹⁷

In addition to a collegial atmosphere, the tea room also gave scholars a wider perception of their 'tribe'. In the book from his ANU PhD thesis, Davison thanked 'my colleagues in the RSSS for their stimulating company', not simply those from his department who would have participated in the same seminars.⁹⁸ Pincus has highlighted tea room discussions as important for the RSSS economic history group's project, *Government and Capitalism*.⁹⁹ For some months, Pincus has remembered, members of various disciplinary groups gathered in the tea room, 'wanting to know what we were doing and telling us what we should be doing'.¹⁰⁰

Tea room discussions encouraged collaboration between individuals from different research areas. Alan Hall has recalled his connection to Neville Cain. Hall and Cain were very different scholars – interested in econometric testing and the history of economic thought, respectively. As Hall has recalled, he had 'lots of mornings at morning tea in the Coombs building listening to Neville teasing out issues. He used me a lot as a sounding board'.¹⁰¹ This is confirmed by Cain's collaborative connections. Cain generally thanked members of his small economic history department, or indeed Hall. Hall was acknowledged for 'helpful discussion' or 'useful comments' throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.¹⁰²

Tea room discussions changed the intellectual trajectory of scholars, encouraging them to explore new areas and lines of inquiry. Pincus has argued that his choice to go to the US over the UK for postgraduate study emerged through tea room

⁹³Economic history departments, for example, barely existed in Australia until the 1960s. Before this, economic historians were generally members of economics departments.

⁹⁴Schedvin phone; Pincus correspondence; Hall interview.

⁹⁵Maddock interview; Davison correspondence.

⁹⁶Hall interview.

⁹⁷Pincus correspondence.

⁹⁸Graeme Davison, *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978), xiii.

⁹⁹Part of which was published as Noel G. Butlin, Jonathan J. Pincus, and Alan Barnard, *Government and Capitalism: Public and Private Choice in Twentieth Century Australia* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1982).

¹⁰⁰Pincus correspondence.

¹⁰¹Hall interview.

¹⁰²Neville Cain, 'Financial Reconstruction in Australia 1893-1900', *Business Archives and History* 6, no. 2 (1966): 166; Neville Cain, 'Trade and Economic Structure at the Periphery', in *Australian Economic Development in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Colin Forster (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Company, 1970), 66; Neville Cain, 'Political Economy and the Tariff: Australia in the 1920s', *Australian Economic Papers* 12, no. 20 (1973): 1; Bryan D. Haig and Neville Cain, 'Industrialization and Productivity: Australian Manufacturing in the 1920s and 1950s', *Explorations in Economic History* 20, no. 2 (1983): 183.

discussions at Monash in the 1960s.¹⁰³ Davison has commented that the ‘home’ of his PhD candidature was decided in the ANU Coombs building space:

When I arrived, I was taken by John La Nauze, who was my mentor ... down to the tea room in the Coombs building to meet Noel Butlin. What I hadn’t realised was that there had been a discussion beforehand of whether I really belonged under Butlin’s supervision, or with La Nauze. ... So we went down and Butlin began, in his abrupt way, by saying ‘now what are you interested in? Are you interested in people or things?’ ... I then probably eventually said something like, ‘well I’m sort of interested in both, but when it comes down to it I am probably interested in people’. And after that he sort of huffed and said, ‘well I guess you’d better stay with La Nauze’.¹⁰⁴

Pincus has recalled that his work with Ian McLean on Australian living standards began as a tea room discussion.¹⁰⁵ Merrett has agreed that several of his prominent research directions began as casual suggestions in the tea room:

I think, it was a very long time ago, that John McCarty casually asked me if I would be interested in writing a history of ANZ at morning tea, Keith Trace told me that I should read Chandler, Tony Dingle and I talked endlessly about things.¹⁰⁶

Pat Troy has also highlighted the effect of the tea room for the progress of his career, recalling the ‘very simple and silly story’ of how his multidisciplinary collaboration with Noel Butlin emerged:

We were out on the terrace, and we were having a discussion, but the director – Perce Partridge – who was a very smart philosopher, he came along and he said, ‘Noel, they want us to give some paper on the social cost of collisions, and I think it would be a good idea if you did something on that’. And Noel says, ‘well, I’ve got a transport engineer right here, we’ll do that. You’ll do that, won’t you Pat?’¹⁰⁷

Partridge’s role in this project is confirmed by the attribution in the book, with the authors writing that, ‘we should record that it was Professor P. H. Partridge’s invitation to present a seminar paper on collisions in 1966 that led us to undertake this study’.¹⁰⁸ These instances indicate the very real effect tea room discussions had on the work of our sample of economic historians. Informal exchanges contributed to broad discussions, multidisciplinary projects, new opportunities, friendships, and a general sense of collegiality amongst members of large faculties.

Decline of the Tea Room

We have seen that the conventions of the tea room changed over several decades to become less hierarchical or obligatory and more self-service and relaxed. However, by the 1990s, and in spite of strong advocacy from some quarters, patronage of the tea

¹⁰³Pincus correspondence.

¹⁰⁴Davison interview.

¹⁰⁵Pincus correspondence. This became Ian W. McLean and Jonathan J. Pincus, ‘Did Australian Living Standards Stagnate between 1890 and 1940?’, *The Journal of Economic History* 43, no. 1 (1983): 193–202.

¹⁰⁶Merrett correspondence.

¹⁰⁷Troy interview. This then became Noel G. Butlin and Pat Troy, *The Cost of Collisions* (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1971).

¹⁰⁸Butlin and Troy, *Cost of Collisions*, ‘Acknowledgments’.

room was in decline.¹⁰⁹ As Davison has lamented, the tea room transformed ‘from the department gathered in a common room drinking tea brewed, usually by secretarial staff, in an urn, to harassed lecturers carrying coffee in styrofoam cups from office to lecture’. Several tea rooms laboured on for some years, including the Flinders Social Sciences common room throughout the 1990s,¹¹⁰ and the Coombs tea room at ANU that finally closed in 2013.¹¹¹ There were important underlying forces at work, including ‘a revolution in work styles, gender relations, communal life and much else’.¹¹² The decline of the tea room was a microcosm of interactive changes in the workplace, perhaps best summarised as the information and communication technologies (ICT) revolution; the corporatisation of universities; and shifts in the structure of the workforce.

At the end of the twentieth century, there emerged a revolution in office technology comparable to the coming of telephones, duplicators, and typewriters a century earlier.¹¹³ Electronic communication offered instant and cheap global connections. Email and then Skype enabled academics to communicate effectively from their office with scholars across the world. The pool of potential collaborators no longer ended at the tea room or other face-to-face organisational gatherings, since papers could be written and discussed in real time with overseas authors. Skype brought more personalised interaction. The World Wide Web provided access to a remarkable breadth of information previously sought through building social capital with scholars in cognate disciplines across the tea room table. The cost of international travel has fallen in real terms and arranging visits, such as to international conferences, has been facilitated by electronic communication and payments systems. Combined with pressure from within universities to develop international links, global began to replace local networks. The share of publications that involve co-authorship, including international collaboration, has grown rapidly in the era of the internet.¹¹⁴

Australia’s professional workforce has always drawn heavily on migrant labour. Appointments from overseas supported higher education expansion in the 1960s and 1970s. Given the era’s relatively slow and expensive communications technology, such migrants focussed on building new academic networks locally. More recently, electronic communication has made it much easier for new overseas hires to retain their original networks rather than invest anew in Australia. They perhaps regard themselves more as sojourners ready to move on to the next opportunity as part of a global workforce.¹¹⁵ Pincus has noted the effect of ‘the imperatives of the cosmopolitan “invisible college”’, commenting that although scholars are employed

¹⁰⁹Schedvin has commented that Syd Butlin, Dean of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Sydney, was an important supporter of the tea room. Davison has made a similar point about John McCarty at Monash. Statham believes it was in decline at UWA by the late 1980s.

¹¹⁰See Flinders University Archives Collection, HH/1/63; DH/2/0.

¹¹¹We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for providing this information.

¹¹²Davison correspondence.

¹¹³Joanne Yates, *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989).

¹¹⁴John P. Walsh and Nancy G. Maloney, ‘Collaboration Structure, Communication Media, and Problems in Scientific Work Teams’, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 2 (2007): 712–13.

¹¹⁵Merrett correspondence.

by a certain institution, their allegiance is, first and foremost, to their 'worldwide sub-sub-discipline'.¹¹⁶

While the ICT revolution has affected many industries, corporatisation has particularly impacted the higher education sector.¹¹⁷ The decline of the tea room coincided with pressures on universities – through increased student numbers and a lower dependence on government funding – to behave in a more commercial manner. The 'enterprise university' was required to seek out additional sources of income, such as fee-paying overseas students, while maximising the return on their human capital and space resources.¹¹⁸ Growing numbers of students were increasingly regarded as clients to be served rather than a small elite of grateful supplicants. Professional administrators were appointed and tasked to lead these changes.¹¹⁹ Spacious tea rooms soon became the target of space optimisers – repurposed for more 'productive' use to teach the expanding number of students and hired to conferences outside teaching semesters. Food and entertainment facilities, previously run rather shabbily by student unions, were now tenanted out to bright modern cafes offering freshly brewed coffee as an attractive alternative to the self-service machines of the tea room. While it has been argued that the spread of coffee shops meant 'you are able to focus the conversation',¹²⁰ this new forum has reduced the serendipity of tea room interaction.

Under pressure from a declining per capita funding base, academic workloads came under scrutiny with pressure for higher teaching loads and every hour of the working year to be accounted for in formal workload models.¹²¹ Forced to look elsewhere to save time, and aware of the opportunities presented by new technology, many academics began to abandon the tea room, its declining patronage serving to confirm managerial views that it was indeed a wasteful resource. Spatial elements of the corporatised landscape, including restructures, mergers, and the trend towards multi-campus universities, have also disrupted the ritual. Merrett has observed:

The fantastic tea room for the Faculty of Economics and Politics at Monash ... ceased to serve its initial function of being a Faculty fora when Monash merged with Caulfield Institute of Technology in the late 1980s and the Faculty was split across two campuses.¹²²

Changes in the structure of the university workforce over the last quarter-century are highly relevant to the decline of the tea room. Greater female participation in the academic workforce was part of a broader employment trend towards families where both parents worked.¹²³ With few sources of support from government or

¹¹⁶Pincus correspondence.

¹¹⁷Simon Marginson and Mark Considine, *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Forsyth, *Modern Australian University*; P. Woelert and V. Millar, 'The "Paradox of Interdisciplinarity" in Australian Research Governance', *Higher Education* 66, no. 6 (2013): 755–67.

¹¹⁸Marginson and Considine, *Enterprise University*.

¹¹⁹Forsyth, *Modern Australian University*.

¹²⁰Cornish correspondence.

¹²¹Hamish Coates, Ian Dobson, Daniel Edwards, Tim Friedman, Leo Goedegebuure, and Lynn Meek, *The Attractiveness of the Australian Academic Profession: A Comparative Analysis* (Carlton: L. H. Martin Institute, 2009), 28; Grant Harman, 'Australian Social Scientists and Transition to a more Commercial University Environment', *Higher Education Research & Development* 24, no. 1 (2005): 86.

¹²²Merrett correspondence.

¹²³G. Hugo, 'Demographic Trends in Australia's Academic Workforce', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 27, no. 3 (2005): 332.

the workplace, time-poor academic families made choices that exploited the new technologies to establish fully equipped home offices and rejected workplace practices outside the formal requirements of their employment. A further change has been the growth of short-term and sessional teaching staff who were likely to demonstrate a more limited commitment to the conventions of the individual workplace.¹²⁴ The formalisation of duties for these time-poor groups, coinciding with the declining sense of obligation to the tea room, confirmed to a new generation of academics that there was no place for this ritual in their busy schedules.

Conclusion

Many of the academics we interviewed yearned for the tea room tradition and chastised the modern corporatised university for missing the intangible benefits of informal discussion. Clearly, the culture of the Australian university workplace has changed in many ways in the last 30 years. The tea room's disappearance is indicative of institutions that are faster moving, more commercially savvy, and more demographically diverse and equitable. Most of these developments would be regarded as changes for the better, yet the perspectives of older and retired academics in the field of economic history represent more than mere sentimentality. Most of them traversed both the old and new eras, which leaves them well placed to form comparative judgements. They recognised the benefits that are less easily attainable through remote forms of electronic communication, especially the serendipitous conversations across disciplines and the deeper in-person conversations with closer colleagues that often initiate new work. For this group in particular, working in an interdisciplinary field such as economic history meant that building up strong personal connections across a range of disciplines was vital. Both strong and weak ties were fostered in the tea room – in-person interactions developed trust and encouraged communication, whilst participation across a range of disciplines increased the diversity of knowledge and opportunities for new research directions. Our evidence suggests this forum had a substantial effect on the research of scholars.

The corporate values of the modern university are not entirely blind, however, to the value of informal and unstructured interaction. Interdisciplinary research groups exist to foster broad interactions on campus, although they are mostly judged on specific outcomes, not the way in which they behave.¹²⁵ Several universities have recently created informal spaces, or hubs, to combine study and networking amongst their students. For example, the University of Melbourne's new Arts West building incorporates informal student learning spaces with the aim of encouraging collaboration and

¹²⁴The sessional staff share of the workforce doubled in the 1990s and has continued to increase. See Emmaline Bexley, Richard James, and Sophie Arkoudis, *The Australian Academic Profession in Transition* (Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2011), 1.

¹²⁵David H. Gunston, *Between Science and Politics: Assuring the Integrity and Productivity of Research* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Claire Wright and Simon Ville, 'Visualising the Interdisciplinary Research Field: The Life Cycle of Economic History in Australia', *Minerva* 55, no. 3 (2017): 321–40.

the creation of 'learning communities'.¹²⁶ It is hoped that this approach will extend to academics as well although it may require a rethinking of some of the organisation's values and practices. Some of the hierarchical and patriarchal elements of the university tea room are historical relics in need of re-imagining. However, the characteristics that mattered – informal discussion with a diverse range of scholars – certainly have an important ongoing role within universities.

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¹²⁶University of Melbourne, 'Making History Visible-Inside and Out', *The Melbourne Newsroom* 24 August 2016, <http://newsroom.melbourne.edu/news/making-history-visible-inside-and-out>. See also Ian Royall, 'Melbourne University's New Arts West Building a True Art Form', *Herald Sun* 9 August 2016, <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/melbourne-universitys-new-arts-west-building-a-true-art-form/news-story/f693e7c173dd3c0c1bef2b912d9f6a6f>.