

Silent resistance to organizational change – an Australian perspective

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156

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper draws on Van Dyne *et al.*'s (2003) conceptual framework of silence to resistance and investigates academics' response to performance management.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting a case study of an Australian university that underwent significant strategic changes between 2004 and 2008, a thematic analysis is undertaken based on data collected via in-depth interviews with staff at different levels of management and academics across all ranks. A semi-structured questionnaire is also administered to all academics to understand their perceptions to changes within the university.

Findings – The findings reveal that academics chose to play the game of silent resistance – concentrating their efforts on acquiescent silence and defensive silence in response to organizational changes. The results also reveal that one of the main reasons academics adopted this form of resistance is due to their fear of being made redundant.

Research limitations/implications – Despite its contributions, our study has several limitations. First, it is based on a single case study of a large Australian university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias.

Practical implications – The study highlights the importance of comprehending the various forms of employee resistance, with a focus on performance management, which bridges the behavioural research gap in this field and facilitates an improved understanding of academics' views on performance management and their behaviour towards the same.

Originality/value – The originality of the paper lies in its two-fold contribution: First, it links Van Dyne *et al.*'s (2003) conceptual framework of silence and voice to resistance in academic environments, which to our knowledge, has not been explored so far. Second, it highlights the development of a silent resistance strategy by academics through "silent treatment", an idea of "social ostracism" within the context of business schools in Australian universities.

Keywords Higher education, Organizational change, Performance management, Silence, Silent resistance

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The conventional role of academia involved engaging in teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities within a collegiate framework (Baxter, 1998; Clark, 1991; Dearlove, 2002). Traditionally, universities and academics operated with a notable level of independence from political and economic influences (Bruneau and Turk, 2004). The principles of professional and academic freedom were held in high esteem and vigorously safeguarded. Academic freedom was primarily meant the freedom of professors to teach without external control (Altbach, 2007). However, these longstanding practices have witnessed significant erosion over the past 4 decades, a period marked by globalizing trends and a pronounced governmental inclination to reshape higher education (Guthrie and Parker, 2014). The advent of New Public Management (NPM) reforms and managerialism has presented challenges for universities to sustain the



traditional values of collegiality and self-regulation (Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015; Aspromourgos, 2012; Blaschke *et al.*, 2014) as academics feel compelled to publish in high-ranking journals, often at the expense of their research integrity and diversity (Harley and Lee, 1997). Organizational changes brought about by the incorporation of performance management systems (PMS) are aligned with the tenets of NPM and are delineated with explicit targets, outputs, and outcomes (Parker and Gould, 1999).

Aligned with the global NPM trend, the Australian Higher Education Sector (HES) has experienced significant transformations, evolving into a more competitive and commercialized domain, characterized by the integration of business and management control methodologies (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999; Winter *et al.*, 2006). This transition has diminished traditional values of professionalism and collegiality, placing greater emphasis on measurement and control (Martin-Sardesai *et al.*, 2017; Parker, 2012). Moreover, the emphasis on scholarship and research has increasingly shifted achieving success in measurable outputs such as publications and research grant acquisition (Gray *et al.*, 2002; Guthrie *et al.*, 2004; Parker, 2010). While some see these changes as aligning universities with global competitive pressures, others highlight the tension between managerial goals and traditional academic values (Drujon d'Astros and Morales, 2024; Parker, 2012; Vaira, 2004). In this managerialist milieu, performance ratings in teaching and research have become pivotal in decisions regarding promotions, appointments, and research endeavours (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013; Humphrey and Gendron, 2015).

Despite the widespread adoption of managerialist practices, scholarly investigations reveal a complex landscape of responses among academics. Although compliance with these directives may seem prevalent, studies suggest this does not always reflect genuine acceptance. Instead, academics often adopt coping mechanisms ranging from strategic compliance to silent resistance (Heath and Burdon, 2013). *Silent resistance* is a pervasive phenomenon in organizations, with employees and management often choosing to remain silent instead of voicing their opinions and concerns (Drujon d'Astros and Morales, 2024; Drujon d'Astros *et al.*, 2024; Sepehnia, 2024). It has emerged as a growing phenomenon involving subtle forms of noncompliance and passive resistance to new management systems or work related improvements (Allain *et al.*, 2021; Drujon d'Astros and Morales, 2024; Drujon d'Astros *et al.*, 2024; Edwards *et al.*, 2009; Marakas and Hornik, 1996; O'Connell *et al.*, 2020; Sepehnia, 2024; Wagner *et al.*, 2011).

This paper explores whether the apparent compliance of academics can be understood as a form of silent resistance. Given the limited research on the impact of organizational changes and silent resistance within universities, investigating academics' resistance is timely and necessary. Such an exploration can shed light on how managerialist practices are subtly challenged and resisted within academic settings.

We adopt a case study method to explore how organizational changes, particularly those driven by Performance Management Systems (PMS), contribute to the emergence of silent resistance among academics within an Australian university. Using Van Dyne *et al.*'s (2003) framework, we explore how silence can serve as a strategic, non-confrontational form of resistance, allowing academics to navigate managerial pressures without openly challenging the system. Our research focuses on understanding these subtle behaviours in the context of broader shifts toward managerialism in higher education. The study makes three key contributions. First, it extends the literature on organizational change by illustrating how academics manage control processes, especially under competing demands from new policies and PMS initiatives. Second, it offers empirical insights into the relationship between PMS-driven changes and silent resistance, revealing how such systems can prompt subtle forms of non-compliance. Finally, the study demonstrates the usefulness of Van Dyne *et al.*'s (2003) model for analysing silent resistance, emphasizing how silence can be a deliberate response to managerial practices rather than merely passive acceptance.

Accordingly, the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 briefly outlines the relevant literature on PMS and silent resistance in the HES. Section 3 contextualizes the study by providing a background of the changes in the Australian HES and Alpha University (AU), the

case study institution. [Section 4](#) discusses the research methods employed in the study. The major findings of the study are presented in [Section 5](#). [Section 6](#) encapsulates the essence of the paper and brings it to a close by providing further avenues for research.

2. Literature review

To position the study, a review of literature on PMS and silent resistance is undertaken.

2.1 Performance management systems

Over the past 3 decades, the Higher Education Sector (HES) has adopted Performance Management Systems (PMS) as part of the broader changes driven by New Public Management (NPM) reforms. Rather than being a standalone transformation, PMS serves as a key mechanism of measurement and control, embodying the managerialist emphasis on accountability, efficiency, and performance alignment. Designed to integrate individual efforts with institutional strategic objectives, PMS has reshaped how universities operate and evaluate success. While its primary role is to ensure alignment with organizational goals, PMS also highlights the tension between managerial priorities and traditional academic values, reflecting the broader shift from collegiality to control in university governance.

The implementation of PMS has been characterized by a shift from the traditional collegial style of management to a business-oriented approach, centred on performance measurement and control ([Cappelli et al., 2024](#); [Gray et al., 2002](#); [Guthrie et al., 2004](#); [Parker, 2010](#)). The shift began in the late 1990s and gained momentum in the early 2000s as universities responded to NPM reforms. During this period, institutions implemented strategic plans that integrated PMS as a core tool for monitoring, assessing, and enhancing academic performance, with an emphasis on efficiency and accountability ([Marginson and Considine, 2000](#); [Parker, 2012](#)). This transition was further driven by international standards and market mechanisms, such as global university rankings, research assessment frameworks (e.g. the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF)), and accreditation standards ([Grossi et al., 2020](#)). These external benchmarks have compelled universities to adopt performance metrics that prioritize measurable outcomes, thereby impacting the way teaching, research, and engagement activities were managed.

Although PMS aims to drive organizational objectives, it has also generated criticism for potentially undermining traditional academic values. For example, the emphasis on performance ratings for teaching and research may overshadow other vital aspects of academic work, such as community engagement, mentoring, and collegiality ([Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013](#); [Humphrey and Gendron, 2015](#)). It is also important to emphasize that academics are not merely passive participants in managerial reforms; their responses may vary, including resistance, as these reforms do not necessarily benefit them in every case. While they may appear to comply with performance measures, research indicates that they actively engage with, adapt to ([Anderson, 2008](#); [Heath and Burdon, 2013](#); [Martin-Sardesai et al., 2017](#)), or resist these changes ([Anderson, 2008](#); [Churchman, 2002](#); [Goodman et al., 2023](#); [Moll, 2003](#)). [Anderson \(2008\)](#), [Churchman \(2002\)](#) and [Moll \(2003\)](#) identified evidence of resistance at the management level, although there are very few evaluations of resistance from academics. The existing literature presents a challenge in identifying evidence-based research that addresses the phenomenon of silent resistance by academic staff to significant changes within universities, particularly in the context of Australian HES. We believe our study addresses this gap.

2.2 Silence as a form of resistance

Resistance to organizational change often arises as a response to perceived threats to established norms, roles, and autonomy. It can take both overt and covert forms, driven by dissatisfaction with changes or opposition to management directives ([Bryant, 2003](#)).

Organizational factors such as shifts in the work environment, changes in cultural norms, and the introduction of unfamiliar management systems can fuel resistance (O'Connor, 1993; Van Schoor, 2003).

Silence, however, is often a subtler form of resistance. Employees may withdraw or disengage without openly expressing their concerns. Though less visible and less likely to cause immediate conflict, silent resistance can be just as disruptive to change efforts. In organizational contexts, silence, often referred to as “organizational silence” (Morrison and Milliken, 2000), is the deliberate withholding of information, failure to communicate concerns, displaying compliance while subtly signalling dissatisfaction (Fleming and Spicer, 2007) known as pseudo compliance. While it may appear as passive compliance, it often represents resistance, signalling a lack of support for imposed changes. Employees may remain silent to avoid confrontation, yet this silence reflects dissatisfaction, especially when changes threaten their values, autonomy, or professional identities (Morrison and Rothman, 2009). Far from being passive, silence can be a strategic choice, allowing employees to avoid negative repercussions while expressing dissatisfaction indirectly (Morrison and Rothman, 2009). Bryant (2003) challenges the notion that silence signifies acquiescence. He suggests it can be a strategic act of resistance, where employees withhold vital information or refuse to fully engage in change processes. This type of silent opposition can effectively undermine change efforts by blocking the flow of critical information necessary for successful implementation (Perray-Redslob and Morales, 2023; Wagner *et al.*, 2011).

Silent resistance is harder to detect but can significantly hinder change by limiting information flow, slowing decision-making, and delaying the implementation of new systems (Xu *et al.*, 2015). Employees may resort to such strategies when they feel disconnected from decision-making processes or perceive changes as harmful to their professional status (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Peirce *et al.*, 1998). Rather than being passive, silent resistance is a strategic response to unwanted changes (Ehtiyar and Yanardağ, 2008; Huang *et al.*, 2005). Employees may engage in it to avoid isolation, protect their interests, or maintain group solidarity.

Despite the recognition of silent resistance in various forms, most research has focused on overt resistance, leaving silent resistance relatively underexplored (Edwards *et al.*, 2009; Marginson and Considine, 2000). The limited focus on silent resistance underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of its role within organizations. Silent resistance can be especially harmful when change is imposed without employee participation or consent (Bovey and Hede, 2001). Strategic silence in response to management’s directives can lead to the failure of organizational changes as employees disengage and refuse to cooperate with new policies or systems (Drujon d’Astros *et al.*, 2024; Wagner *et al.*, 2011).

3. Context of study

3.1 *The Australian HES*

The Australian HES comprises both 37 public sector universities and over 150 private higher education providers and is of significant economic and social importance, educating nearly a diverse mix of 1.5 million national and international students a year (Universities Australia, 2017) in 2014 (Norton and Cherastiditham, 2014) and achieving a record-high of AUS\$7.4bn in international education exports for the 2018/19 fiscal year (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The sector has undergone significant changes since the late 1980s, notably with the introduction of NPM reforms (Cameron and Guthrie, 1993; Guthrie and Neumann, 2007; Parker, 2011, 2012). The changes started with the *Dawkins Reforms* in 1987, moving the HES from a binary system, which distinguished universities from Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) and merged them into a Unified National System (UNS) of universities. In the binary system, there was a distinction between universities and CAEs where the universities, with their emphasis on research, were more academically orientated, and the CAEs placed emphasis on skills training and prepared students for the workplace. The distinction became blurred with the adoption of a UNS (Wells, 1994). The Australian government developed a

cohesive vision for Australian universities focusing on the dissolution of the binary system (Bobe, 2012; Moll, 2003). The relationship between government and universities experienced significant transformation before and after the Dawkins reforms (Marginson and Considine, 2000). These discussions and policy papers marked the beginning of a new era for tertiary institutions, with ongoing repercussions for the academic field due to the profound changes in the academic environment (Churchman, 2002).

The *Relative Funding Model* introduced in 1990 was another crucial development, linking funding directly to student enrolment numbers and encouraging a more competitive approach among institutions (Miller and Pincus, 1997). Alongside this, the introduction of the Research Quantum (Ramsden, 1999) allocated research funding based on output, fundamentally shifting the financial and strategic priorities of universities by emphasizing performance metrics (Marginson and Considine, 2000; Ramsden, 1999). These changes underscored a broader trend towards efficiency and accountability, which set the foundation for further managerialist practices. The *West Review* of 1998 further reinforced this trend by advocating for decentralization and deregulation, promoting a market-driven approach that allowed universities to respond more flexibly to market demands. This review was significant in encouraging universities to diversify revenue streams and reduce dependence on government funding, promoting a model where market supply and demand influenced university offerings (Dollery *et al.*, 2006). The review highlighted the growing impact of globalization and technological advances, pushing for continued deregulation in line with the broader NPM agenda (Marginson, 1998; West, 1998). The *Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)*, introduced in 2010, was another key policy that solidified the emphasis on research performance and accountability. Although the ERA has been put on hold, its influence persists, as it institutionalized the culture of measuring research quality through rigorous assessment frameworks. This further entrenched performance-based funding models, driving competition among universities and maintaining a focus on measurable outputs (DEST, 2002; Marginson, 2002). The strategic focus on metrics such as research output, quality, and impact continues to shape the performance management systems (PMS) employed by universities today.

The NPM-inspired reforms in the Australian HES introduced greater scrutiny on research quality and efficiency, driving universities to adopt performance-driven management practices. PMS have become key tools to monitor and enhance performance across teaching, research, and engagement, emphasizing accountability and measurable success. However, these systems have been critiqued for prioritizing quantifiable metrics over traditional academic values of autonomy and collegiality, leading to varied responses from academic staff, including forms of silent resistance. Understanding these historical developments is crucial to grasping the strategic shifts in Australian universities and the dynamics of NPM that have fostered academic silence. This study explores how these reforms created a need for performance-driven management practices that, while promoting efficiency, also inadvertently encouraged conditions for silent resistance, allowing for a better analysis of how contemporary managerialist practices influence academic engagement, compliance, and subtle forms of opposition.

3.2 Organizational changes in Alpha university

AU assumed university status in 1989 following the Dawkins Reforms (1988) merging three Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) into a single, comprehensive university. This establishment marked a shift from vocational training to a more research-focused academic structure, leading to substantial growth in infrastructure, student enrolments, research activity, and revenue over subsequent years. However, this growth occurred alongside increasing financial pressures due to a decline in government funding support, necessitating strategic adjustments to maintain competitiveness.

With the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor (VC) in the early 2000s, the transformation process was further significantly accelerated. Under the new leadership, achieving legitimacy

became a paramount issue for the university's top management. Accordingly, under this new leadership a vision for the university was outlined which focused on cutting costs, through making staff redundancies. Mergers and amalgamations were undertaken within the university both at the faculty and department levels and also at the academic program levels to streamline operations and reduce duplication of administrative costs.

The changes started with the creation of AU as a university by combining semi-autonomous institutions that existed as a part of AU. The members of the semi-autonomous or federated universities had separate management structures, internal resource allocation processes and their own academic programs. The combination of all of them into the one AU meant that there was huge reorganization to be put in place to overcome the duplication of costs of running academic programs, administration costs, and the management of separate organizational structures.

Centralization was solidified during 2000–2001, as AU integrated operations to streamline management, improve transparency, and enhance financial control. A new Performance Management System (PMS) was developed to evaluate the effectiveness of faculties, departments, and individual academics. The PMS employed both lead and lag measures; lead indicators focused on proactive activities such as research grant applications and teaching innovations, while lag indicators measured outcomes like published research and student feedback. These metrics were intended to drive performance improvements across teaching, research, and engagement, yet they also intensified workload pressures on staff, further complicating their professional roles.

The implementation of a new Resource Allocation Model (RAM) further marked a departure from traditional budgetary processes. Historically, resource allocation at AU was based on fixed, historical funding patterns. In contrast, the RAM introduced revenue and performance-based budgeting, linking financial resources directly to strategic priorities. This model was designed to promote efficiency and accountability, encouraging faculties and departments to align their operations with broader institutional goals. However, this shift also centralized control, reducing departmental autonomy, and fostering tension among academic staff.

Additionally, AU's strategic direction under the new VC was articulated through a framework described as "four reportable battlefields," encompassing core focus areas: relevant research, financial sustainability, community engagement, and quality teaching. These focal points, alongside 15 strategic imperatives outlined in planning documents, guided the university's actions across multiple strategic plans (2004–2008 and 2009–2013). While the leadership's vision aimed to enhance AU's profile and operational viability, it also introduced pressures that were met with resistance from academic staff. The strategic emphasis on performance-driven management and measurable outputs contrasted with traditional academic values, fostering conditions for academic silence. This reaction became apparent as staff chose to disengage, comply passively, or subtly resist the growing managerial culture—behaviours that this study seeks to explore further.

4. Research design

4.1 Framing silent resistance

Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) offer a useful framework for understanding organizational silence by distinguishing between silence and voice. While voice is often seen as active resistance, silence is usually viewed as passive. Van Dyne's model recognizes silence as more than just passive acquiescence and identifies three types of silence based on employee motives: (1) Acquiescent silence, (2) Defensive silence, and (3) ProSocial silence.

Acquiescent silence involves intentionally passive or uninvolved behaviour when employees withhold information based on the belief that speaking is futile or due to a low sense of self-efficacy to make a difference, resulting in disengaged behaviour. Under this category, silence is a result of fundamental resignation.

Defensive silence involved active withholding of information motivated by active avoidance based on fear that expression of ideas is personally risky, it includes hiding personal mistakes as a form of self-protection. Defensive silence is more proactive involving awareness and consideration of alternatives followed by a conscious decision to withhold ideas, information and opinions as the best personal strategy at the moment (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). The behaviour is linked to what Rosen and Tesser (1972) describe as the “Mum effect”, which refers to the tendency to speak about the positives rather than the negatives and can have negative organizational implications (Harvey, 1988). One example of defensive silence is omitting facts about problems that should be corrected to protect the self.

ProSocial silence is an extended version of the silence category proposed by Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) that considers silence as a discretionary behaviour where the aim of employees is for the benefit other people in the organization by withholding ideas, information, and opinions. In contrast to defensive silence, ProSocial silence is motivated by concern for others, rather than negative personal consequence that might occur from speaking up.

Van Dyne’s framework is particularly useful for this study, as it helps explore silent resistance as an active but subtle form of opposition. It allows for a deeper understanding of how silence can be used strategically in response to organizational changes, depending on contextual factors like organizational culture and power dynamics.

4.2 Research method: case study and interviews

AU was selected as the case study institution due to its competitive location in a major Australian city, its robust teaching and research aspirations and accomplishments, and the researcher’s connection to the university, which facilitated access to individuals and internal documents. Data for this study encompassed publicly available documents, both policy-related at the Australian HES level and university-related at the AU level. This included content from the university’s website, publicly available electronic documents, media articles, and library resources such as annual reports and books. The second source of data included face-to-face semi-structured interviews with senior management and academic staff. The publicly available documents offered an overview of various policies concerning the existing status of AU, the many challenges faced by the new leadership due to a new strategy in place, sector wide reduction in public funding, rising compliance costs, increased volatility of students. University documents provided insights into the institution’s strategic direction.

Our study adopts a longitudinal case study approach to capture the evolving nature of organizational changes over time. The findings draw on two phases of data collection: the first phase (completed in August 2014) captured the initial responses to strategic plans and performance management systems introduced between 2004 and 2008, while the second phase (conducted in August and September 2023) allowed us to examine the long-term effects of these reforms. This longitudinal approach enables a deeper understanding of how managerial changes unfolded and how academics’ responses evolved over nearly 2 decades. By revisiting the case after a significant time gap, we could explore shifts in perceptions, adaptations, and forms of resistance—particularly silent resistance—within the evolving institutional environment. The inclusion of participants across different levels and disciplines, selected using a snowball technique, further enriched our analysis by incorporating diverse experiences of change.

Reflective notes were maintained throughout the data collection process, allowing for initial analysis and interpretation (Eisenhardt, 1989; O’Dwyer, 2004). This involved open and topical coding (Pope and Mays, 2006), analytical coding (Richards and Morse, 2007) and identifying overarching themes (King and Horrocks, 2010). Material related to specific topics, such as AU’s restructuring, organizational changes were identified, grouped under relevant themes, and coded accordingly. Analytical coding was then performed to create categories and to reflect and group the topical coding into analytical codes, such as changes to AU, and performance management, silence, resistance and silent resistance. The overarching themes,

which guided the interview questions, were used to further explore and shed light on the collected data, focusing on concepts like performance management, academic performance, and organizational performance. Codes identified in the literature were also linked to [Van Dyne et al.'s \(2003\)](#) framework. The themes and codes were aligned with the research question, literature analysis, and interview data, with caution exercised in interpreting data within the theoretical framework.

From the interview, our aim was to explore the reasons for silence and how staff may have resisted in a silent mode. The interviews began with a broad question about how the changes in management control systems (MCS) were operationalized, allowing participants to share their perceptions and experiences. As discussions progressed, participants elaborated on the challenges they faced during implementation, and we encouraged them to describe their reactions, focusing on resistance or silence. When there was little or no overt resistance, we asked them to explain their silence and how they adapted to the changes. Many interviewees shared experiences of both overt and silent resistance, highlighting how silence became a strategy instead of open defiance. This approach allowed us to effectively explore silent resistance, connecting the inquiry to our theoretical framework.

To ensure the anonymity of the data, a coding system employing numbers for individuals was utilized. Participants were categorized into three groups. "Group 1" represents a cohort of three individuals with extensive careers in the Australian Higher Education Sector (HES), who, at the time of the interview, were holding senior management executive positions (e.g. Deputy Vice-Chancellors and Pro Vice-Chancellors). "Group 2" represents a group of three faculty-level individuals at AU with substantial careers in the HES both nationally and internationally, who, at the time of the interview, were holding management executive positions (e.g. Deans, Associate Deans and Heads of Schools). "Group 3" represents a group of four department-level individuals at AU with long careers in the Australian HES, who, at the time of the interview were Professors, Associate Professors, Senior Lecturers and Lecturers. The grouping of interviewees into top management, middle management, and academic staff was essential for capturing diverse perspectives on the organizational changes at AU. Senior management designed and led the changes, management executive implemented them, and academic staff experienced these changes in their day-to-day roles. This grouping allowed the study to examine how each level responded to the new management control systems (MCS) and contributed to understanding the concept of silent resistance. Data saturation was reached after interviewing twelve interviewees ([Guest et al., 2006](#)), as the remaining seven respondents reiterated similar responses to previous interviewees, providing no new information, hence interviews were stopped after the 19th interviewee. Details of interviewees are provided in [Table 1](#) below.

5. Findings: patterns and perspectives of silent resistance

We draw on interviewee narratives to examine the nature and impact of significant organizational changes implemented at AU through its performance management system (PMS). These changes reshaped AU's structure and operations and simultaneously elicited varying degrees of resistance among staff. While some employees expressed their concerns openly, others chose to remain silent. Additionally, a number of staff members engaged in subtle resistance, strategically employing silence as a form of response. This silent resistance allowed them to express dissent indirectly, avoiding direct confrontation while still signalling dissatisfaction with the new system. Notably, this form of resistance ultimately impacted the achievement of certain organizational goals, as staff disengagement and non-compliance subtly undermined the institution's efforts to fully implement and benefit from the PMS changes.

5.1 Changes within AU- the source of resistance and silence

The interviews revealed that the strategic changes at AU over the years, including the implementation of a new performance management system (PMS), were key drivers of silence

Table 1. Details of the interviewees

Number of interviewees	Designation	Interview duration
Group one	Top management-Senior executives	
3	Deputy Vice-Chancellors/Pro Vice-Chancellors	60–120 min
1	Senior Executives	50 min
Group two	Middle management-Academic managers	
1	Dean	65 min
2	Associate Deans	50–120 min
2	Head of School	60–90 min
Group three	Academics – Operational level	
2	Professors	65 min
1	Associate Professors	65 min
2	Senior lecturers	50–90 min
5	Lecturers	45–80 min
Total	19	

Source(s): Authors' own creation

and resistance among academic staff. These changes redefined the university's structure, resource allocation systems, operations, and culture, leading to increased workloads, particularly in meeting key performance indicators (KPIs) tied to core academic activities. Under a new leadership style, the centralization of power widened the gap between management and academics, strained communication, and fostered a climate of distrust. Interviewees shared experiences that highlighted their responses to these challenges, including instances of resistance and silence, with many adapting silent resistance as a strategic coping mechanism (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003).

It's become more structured, more inflexible, more down . . . downwards . . . less true consultancy . . . and I think there's a huge resistance between staff and upper management now. Upper management are distrusted. They're seen to be telling lies. They're seen to have a ___ that the workers have no idea what it's about. They have failed abysmally to communicate if they meant to . . . what their overall goal or plan was and why they were doing the things they were doing (Group Three interviewee)

The organizational changes implemented by the university led to resistance among academics, largely driven by inadequate funding for research, teaching, and community engagement. Faculty members faced challenges in articulating their financial needs and negotiating budgets with university executives, which exacerbated tensions:

What created the tension and resistance was the inability of the faculties to be able to express their financial requirements . . . and then go forward, and negotiate with the executives through the budget office what they required. (Group Three Interviewee)

Dissatisfaction grew as staff workloads intensified. Many distrusted the PMS, believing it was being used as a control mechanism. Resistance among academic staff was primarily driven by the unmanageable workload, inadequate funding for core activities, and the disruptive effects of cost-cutting measures. Tensions arose between teaching and research-focused academics, as research was often privileged, forcing staff to complete research activities during personal time. These pressures manifested in overt forms, such as union involvement, and subtle forms.

Yeah, there's a huge problem balancing it. So most of our research had to be done in our own time and yeah . . . whereas people I've observed in the schools who've been pressured to spend much more time on research at the expense of teaching and learning . . . so that was research privileged over learning and teaching. (Group Three Interviewee)

Moreover, the introduction of a performance management system (PMS) to align staff goals with university objectives further amplified the pressure. While intended to incentivize performance, the PMS was perceived by staff as a tool for control, increasing workloads and eroding trust.

The performance measures created a lack of trust situation among staff as they believe the intended purpose of the information gather through performance evaluation tools will affect them and management will use them against staff as a lever of control. (Group Three Interviewee)

Faced with these challenges, staff often chose silence over open confrontation, fearing career repercussions or job loss. Silence became both an individual and collective strategy for coping with pressures and perceived inequities (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

And jobs always, you feel fairly tenuous . . . maybe you're not going to be there forever. People go . . . I don't want to complain because I might be going for promotion . . . I'm not gonna rock the boat . . . I'd just keep doing my job. (Group Three Interviewee)

Responses to these changes varied. Some staff openly resisted, engaging in verbal confrontations or union-led actions, particularly around workload issues (Goodman *et al.*, 2023):

. . . they go along to the meeting, you know pound the table, and the union were . . . involved . . . so work plan work was the big area of resistance. (Group Three Interviewee)

Despite the variability and complexity of resistance patterns, the findings reveal that silence often served as a powerful and multifaceted resistance strategy among academic staff. This silent resistance was not uniform but manifested in several ways, including leaving the job, defying instructions, or engaging in pseudo-compliance. These behaviours underscore the nuanced ways academics responded to the control measures implemented during the change process. The following section delves deeper into these behaviours through interviewee reflections, highlighting specific examples of how silence was used as a deliberate strategy to resist managerial oversight while minimizing overt conflict. These reflections illustrate the broader implications of silent resistance on institutional processes and outcomes, including staff turnover, disrupted programs, and reduced morale.

5.2 *Silent forms of resistance*

In our study, it is revealed that in addition to open resistance through the formal process, some staff choose to adopt silent resistance due to, workload pressures, challenges in meeting the PMS targets, and lack of funding related to the core academic activities. The behaviour was adopted in various forms. Such as leaving the job (resignation), staying but defying through ignoring organizational instructions in silence, being non-cooperative through avoidance and disengagement, and displaying legitimate behaviour without being genuinely motivated to achieve the goals (Pseudo compliance) and manipulate. These characteristics identified aggregated resistance pattern, termed by (Williams, 2002) as “silent treatment” and was adopted through avoidance, denial, non-response (pretending to be ignorant), and cooling off (delay in response).

The overwhelming workload led to significant dissatisfaction among staff, prompting many to adopt silent resistance. Instead of confronting management directly, staff employed non-confrontational strategies such as exceeding allocated preparation times, delaying meetings, and deflecting workload discussions. These subtle actions allowed them to challenge unrealistic expectations without risking open defiance.

The Head of School described tension with a subordinate, noting that staff often struggled to understand or adhere to workload agreements. Overwhelmed by the demands, staff would delay discussions with excuses like illness, causing tasks to be postponed repeatedly. One manager shared:

That was one of the easiest ways to deal with the head of school you didn't want to see. You'd leave a message with the school secretary saying you were sick. The workload would drift for another month, and by the time we rescheduled, one session was mostly gone. (Group Two Interviewee)

Hence, the Staff members consciously withheld information about their workload struggles and opted to delay discussions under the pretence of illness. This behaviour represents an active avoidance strategy, driven by the perception that openly addressing workload concerns or tensions with the Head of School would be personally risky. By deferring tasks and communication, they sought self-protection, avoiding potential confrontation or negative repercussions. It suggests that rather than fostering healthy competition or collaboration, the changes led to a culture of silence where employees withdrew from discussions and refrained from expressing their ambitions or engaging with supervisors. This form of isolation, as opposed to proactive engagement, aligns with the concept of defensive silence (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003), where individuals avoid confrontation and remain passive despite underlying frustrations.

Silent resistance was also evident in the departure of senior staff, which occurred without explicit confrontation but created significant operational challenges, particularly in teaching and learning. In some cases, their departure resulted in the discontinuation of new degree programs due to a shortage of qualified staff. As one academic manager noted, the university had to discontinue a program because of the unavailability of staff:

A lot of staff had resigned. So, there was no one left to teach the new degree. (Academic manager)

The staff action described can also be interpreted as acquiescent silence as a form of silent resistance, where the lack of engagement and eventual resignation reflects a passive but deliberate response to dissatisfaction. While seemingly disengaged, their silence and withdrawal could be seen as a subtle form of resistance against the conditions or management practices they found untenable. By withholding their participation and allowing the program to fail due to a lack of staff, they indirectly challenged the institution's inability to address underlying issues, demonstrating resistance through inaction rather than overt confrontation.

Additionally, the morale of remaining academics suffered, which had a cascading effect on students. As one interviewee noted, diminished morale translated into lower student satisfaction, particularly regarding teacher arrangements and resistance to proposed changes.

Well, in terms of goals around student satisfaction, students weren't very satisfied with the teacher arrangements for the programs. The students were also very resistant to the changes being proposed. (Group Two interviewee).

Similar evidence of acquiescent silent behaviour was observed in meeting research KPIs. Rather than engaging in overt opposition, some staff chose to leave, subtly undermining institutional goals by withdrawing their intellectual and financial contributions. This quiet disengagement underscores their dissatisfaction with the university's shifting priorities and perceived misalignment with academic needs. The resignation of academics can thus be interpreted as a silent form of resistance, reflecting a passive yet impactful response to organizational changes.

They change their budget as they see fit to what they want and then used up strategic plan whatever they suit to justify it . . . but in the long run that was one reason why I left. (Group Three Interviewee)

For these individuals, resignation served as a means to reclaim agency over their professional pursuits. By redirecting their efforts and resources to independent initiatives, they effectively denied the institution access to critical funding and expertise:

Now the research money I bring in no longer goes to the university; it goes to my own company. So, the university has lost that. (Group Three Interviewee)

This form of resistance, while non-confrontational, carries significant implications for the organization. It signals dissatisfaction and disrupts institutional objectives, illustrating how passive actions like resignation can function as a powerful mechanism of dissent.

The staff members who did not openly resist or resign and chose to remain in the organization and express their resistance in more subtle ways, one manager noted the lack of cooperation manifested through delays in responses from some academic staff, highlighting that,

There wasn't an accompanying response in those cases, or the response came too late. (Group Two Interviewee)

This behaviour aligns with [Van Dyne et al.'s \(2003\)](#) concept of defensive silence, where individuals actively choose inaction as a self-protective measure, rather than overtly addressing the issues at hand.

The study reveals that, within the context of PMS, staff behaviour, when evaluated against performance targets, may subtly indicate resistance in various forms. One example of silent defiance observed was a lack of engagement, evidenced by some staff's reluctance to pursue promotion opportunities or their tendency to isolate themselves.

I think they most probably just verbalised but did nothing about it. They just like . . . they didn't increase their own output; didn't try to become involved, and just complained. It's normal human nature. (Group Two Interviewee)

Another interviewee remarked:

What I see happens . . . it doesn't create competition, it creates silence. Nobody seems to be going for promotion, no one says they're going for a research grant. It becomes, "This is my world and I won't tell you." (Group One interviewee)

The staff's lack of engagement, reluctance to pursue promotion opportunities, and tendency toward isolation reflect a form of passive disengagement driven by the belief that speaking up or participating would be futile. This behaviour aligns with the concept of acquiescent silence, marked by resignation and a sense of low self-efficacy. Furthermore, it can be seen as a subtle form of resistance, as their inaction indirectly undermines the goals of the organization's performance management system (PMS).

Some staff employed manipulation tactics to meet Teaching and Learning KPIs, such as Student Feedback on Teaching (SFT) and Student Feedback on Units (SFU). For instance, one participant remarked:

Well, I know . . . some academics in the past who have skewed those results by going through the actual SFTs and pulling out the bad ones . . . because they know the university . . . (Group Three interviewee).

Another described how academic standards were intentionally lowered to secure favourable evaluations:

You get greens by dumbing down the content. Making your assessments easy. Giving students information about final exams. Students love that. They pass, it's easy. Green lights. (Group Three interviewee)

In both instances the behaviour can be considered defensive silence under [Van Dyne et al.'s \(2003\)](#) framework. As the action of some academics selectively altering or withholding certain results (i.e. pulling out bad SFTs) reflects active withholding of information. This behaviour appears to be motivated by self-protection, as they are likely avoiding potential negative consequences from the university, such as criticism or repercussions for poor feedback. The selective engagement with formal mechanisms, or manipulative practices compromises institutional goals and the broader objectives of accountability and quality improvement. Ultimately, these behaviours risk undermining the university's credibility and reputation, limiting its ability to achieve long-term goals.

Similar to the manipulation of Teaching and Learning KPIs, the manipulation of research KPIs by some staff can be seen as a form of subtle resistance to institutional performance

expectations. Some academics meet the minimum threshold required to be labelled “research active” without genuinely contributing to research output, as highlighted by an interviewee:

Many staff managed to survive the PM level just by being engaged in some sort of research activities. However, for promotion, they need a different level of output. The PM is a kind of lever to keep them engaged in some sort of research (Group Three Interviewee).

The academics’ strategy of meeting the minimum threshold for being “research active” without genuinely contributing to research output reflects a form of active withholding of true effort. This action is likely motivated by a self-protective strategy, where staff comply with the requirements just enough to avoid scrutiny or negative consequences, but without fully engaging in the process. Such strategic engagement undermines the institution’s intent to promote genuine research productivity. The interviewee expressed frustration with this system, particularly the uniform allocation of research time, which failed to distinguish between active researchers and those minimally meeting KPIs:

When workload agreements started to come in, and people were fighting for all the research time, but they weren’t producing anything, and for me, it was producing a lot, I was getting the same kind of time allocation (Group Three Interviewee).

The interviewee noted resentment (resistant attitude) toward colleagues who exploited the KPI system, contributing little while benefiting equally:

There were people producing nothing, and it was really angering to me because I was producing all this stuff, and they were doing nothing, and they were still getting time on their workload (Group Three Interviewee).

By adhering only to the minimal research requirements, these staff subtly resist the deeper engagement the institution seeks, exposing flaws in the research KPI system and challenging its fairness.

According to [Van Dyne et al.’s \(2003\)](#) ProSocial silence framework, silence is seen as a discretionary behaviour aimed at benefiting others within the organization by withholding ideas, information, or opinions. In contrast, this study reveals that many staff members adopt silence as a defensive strategy to protect their own self-interests. As one junior academic shared,

When we were smaller, it was better. We knew people. And people could ring you up and say, “This is the situation, do this, do this, do this” instead of [a] big anonymous world. (Group Three Interviewee)

The above behaviour reflects a disengaged attitude that is connected to protecting self-interest and in contrast with the ProSocial silence behaviour. Similarly, another interviewee noted:

I don’t think any of the more senior academics in this discipline who actually sat down with a junior academic and helped them to write a research grant or offered to be on the research grant with them. People in this area seem to be very self centred. They look after themselves. They’re not collegial (Group Three Interviewee)

Such behaviour aligns with defensive silence, where silence is used as a means of self-preservation rather than as a tool for benefiting others. This form of disengagement can undermine the achievement of organizational goals, as it creates a culture of non-collaboration and limits the sharing of resources, ultimately hindering collective progress.

6. Summary and conclusion

The study investigates the phenomenon of resistance to organizational changes with a specific focus on PMS within an Australian university. A large Australian university as a case-study organization was selected and a snowball technique was applied to select 19 academics for interviews across different levels and disciplines. A semi-structured questionnaire was also administered to analyse staff resistances of the organizational changes. The study highlights

the prevalence of silent resistance among staff, driven by factors such as workload pressures, challenges in meeting Performance Management System (PMS) targets, and insufficient funding for core academic activities. Staff members engaged in silent resistance through various non-confrontational strategies, such as delaying meetings, avoiding discussions, and engaging in “pseudo compliance”, where staff outwardly conformed to new performance measures while subtly resisting them. Silent resistance was also linked to a widening power gap between management and academics, as well as decreased trust and communication, which further contributed to disengagement.

The study finds that overwhelming workload demands led to passive resistance, with staff members prolonging tasks, postponing meetings or using illness as an excuse for delays, which disrupted academic operations. Silent resistance also manifested in the resignation of senior staff, leading to operational challenges and the discontinuation of programs. This withdrawal reflected misaligned priorities between staff needs and organizational goals. Many staff members disengaged from career progression by avoiding promotion and isolating themselves from broader organizational activities.

Drawing upon [Van Dyne et al. \(2003\)](#), our study extends the theoretical understanding of silent resistance. Silence resistance was not merely a lack of resistance but a strategic response to organizational changes. Based on the framework of [Van Dyne et al. \(2003\)](#), acquiescent silence was widespread among academics who felt powerless to influence decision-making. They passively withheld ideas and opinions due to limited negotiation power and a perception of futility in raising concerns. Additionally, defensive silence was adopted as a means of self-protection in response to the new PMS. This form of resistance was especially prevalent among academics who feared that speaking out might result in negative career consequences. This culture of silence undermined both competition and collaboration, aligning with the concept of defensive silence, where employees chose not to voice concerns due to fear of negative repercussions. Another important finding is that mid-level managers also engaged in silent resistance. Many adopted a strategy of remaining silent rather than openly challenging PMS reforms to protect their self-interest, which further complicated the implementation of performance targets. The reluctance of both staff and middle managers to express concerns created additional barriers to successful organizational change.

This research study provides valuable insights for practitioners, particularly those managing organizational change and changes to PMS. The findings highlight the impact of PMS, which resulted in a widening power gap, decreased trust, confusion, and diminished communication between management and academics, leading to resistance. This study shows that silent resistance, while often overlooked, plays a critical role in the dynamics of organizational change within higher education institutions. Organizations must be aware of the subtle forms of resistance that can undermine change efforts and develop strategies to foster a more inclusive and participatory approach. They should consider adopting strategies to encourage open communication and foster a collegial environment. This could involve creating safe spaces for academics to voice their concerns, providing clear and consistent communication about changes, and ensuring that decision-making processes are inclusive and transparent. By doing so, university management can develop more effective strategies to engage staff and mitigate the adverse effects of such resistance.

Despite its contributions, our study has several limitations. First, it is based on a single case study of a large Australian university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias. Based on the insights gained and these limitations, we identify several areas for future research to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon further. These include investigating the psychological factors and underlying motives behind silence, utilizing theories such as the “silent treatment” and the “mum effect”, exploring the role of organizational culture in facilitating or discouraging silent resistance, examining the long-term effect of silent resistance on organizational outcomes such as KPIs, and conducting comparative studies across different industries or countries to understand how silent resistance varies in different organizational

and cultural contexts. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a better understanding of silent resistance and inform the development of strategies to effectively manage and mitigate its impact on organizational change processes and performance management.

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