

# Watching The Chair: A walk through the half-dim corridors of 'The Academia'?

Netflix's *The Chair*, provides a rare mainstream representation of life in contemporary (US) academia. In this [cross-post](#), [Oya Zincir](#), reflects on the show and discusses how far it reflects the reality of life in academia more widely.

Shows that accurately represent academia are rare. The Chair's co-creator Annie Julia Wyman received her Ph.D. in English from Harvard. That's why I was so excited when Netflix series *The Chair* came out recently. The synopsis was very promising: "At a major university, the first woman of colour to become chair tries to meet the dizzying demands and high expectations of a failing English department." The series takes place at the fictitious Pembroke University, "a frigid northeastern school that's supposedly a lower-tier Ivy" as Sophie Gilbert described in her post at [The Atlantic](#). It touches on many issues such as marketisation, free speech, concern with reputation, appropriate behaviour, intergenerational tensions, sexism.

Let's start with marketisation... In his book [La Société Malade de la Gestion](#) Vincent de Gaulejac argued a toxic business ideology shapes our society with an objectivism that aims to make everything measurable, a functionalism that treats the organization as predefined data, a technocratic instrumentalism based on the indisputable position of expertise and a utilitarianism that accepts the worker as a human resource for the firm's effectiveness. This ideology has also spread to academia as well. [Frank Furedi](#) argued that "since the late 1970s the culture of academic life has been transformed by the institutionalisation of the policies of marketisation... Quaint academic rituals and practices have been gradually displaced by management techniques as departments mutate into cost centres often run by administrators recruited from the private and public sector."

As a research and teaching assistant who works for a business administration department at a university, I believe I have the first hand experience. Nearly all of the courses are designed for how to find a better job, to be an enthusiastic entrepreneur, to learn a useful program such as MS Project... how to increase business performance, to motivate employees in terms of increasing financial outcomes, to innovate rapidly, to sell much more products/services... Students are customers, university must serve for them... Professors who work very closely with private sector and neglect to do some serious academic research are welcome... market subjectivity and neoliberal governmentality in Foucauldian terms.

In the series, the organization is the university, managers are the dean and the brand new department chair, the workers are professors and the customers are students. When Dean Larson said there will be forced retirement because of budget cuts, marketisation shows itself. And when Prof. Joan Hambling says the department chair that she will not treat students as mere consumers; she tries to resist it.

## ***Being a department chair... being a teaching assistant...***

What is being a department chair like? Ji-Yoon's "first act as the department head is literally to fall out of her broken office chair" as [described by Karen Tongson](#), pointing out the metaphor behind it: "what is going on here?" Her expressions look like she has no idea what to do at first. Then, she faces many issues such as declining enrolment, tightening budgets, gender and racial discrimination, politically sensitized students, and the increasing lure of celebrities. In fact, [Tia Noelle Pratt wrote that](#) "Oh's position as the department chair is unrealistically depicted as one that wields power and prestige that will ultimately result in measurable impact. In reality, it's more of a middle-management position that requires balancing the competing needs of faculty and students with those of senior administrators. Too often, faculty and students want more resources and money for hiring and programming, while senior administrators want new and innovative ways to cut costs."



[A recent study](#) found that department chairs are embedded in two worlds: the world of hierarchy and the world of collegiality. Both have their own rules and moves – hard to get both right. [Another study](#) found that department chairs act as ‘umbrella carriers’ who protect faculty from unnecessary/damaging initiatives/information from the top to allow for good professional work to take place below. [In another study](#), the author found that chairs often struggle to balance common sense in decision making, humanity in working with others, and savvy in the overwhelming political landscape, all while possessing limited authority. We can see that Ji-Yoon is stuck between her peers (actually with the dean’s own words: “they are not your peers anymore”) and faculty administration. This situation is pretty anxiety-provoking indeed.

What about teaching assistants? [A recent study](#) already addressed that graduate teaching assistants are likely to encounter challenges in their work such as maintaining authority in their interactions with students, being subordinate to the course instructor, worried about making mistakes and contradicting the course instructor, limited autonomy, and lack of formal academic status at the university, etc. Hence, I would also like to focus on Lila’s character. She appears in some episodes very briefly, but I saw myself in her shoes every time she appeared. Full of anxiety, feeling unsafe? Check. Anxiety about finishing Ph.D. thesis? Check. Anxiety of covering supervisor in some awkward situations? Check. Debt? Check. The list goes on and on... When Bill said that Lila is writing a brilliant thesis, I immediately thought that Lila will be offered a job at the university. But in reality, is it so? This issue raises some questions about marketisation, again.

### ***Free speech on campus, concern with reputation... and how to define appropriate behaviour***

The storyline around Prof. Bill Dobson raises some questions about free speech, concern with reputation, and how to define appropriate behaviour. He arrives late to class and accidentally broadcasts an intimate video of his deceased wife. Later in the class, he uses the Nazi salute in teaching absurdism and fascism. Some students record this gesture on their phones and start circulating the video to each other. Afterward, some of the students protest against him outside Prof. Ji-Yoon Kim’s (the department chair) office window. When he is requested to write a public apology for the salute at the disciplinary proceeding, he refuses to do so. Instead, he organizes a public speech addressing students and says that he is proud of their dissent. He also tells students that they are misinterpreting what he did and he compares himself to professors who fled Nazi Germany. His words dissatisfy students, and the incident becomes bigger and bigger. Later, he learns that he is being suspended, is not allowed on campus and he must write a formal apology. His attorney advises him to take a settlement and move somewhere else.

When the attorneys for the university tell Ji-Yoon that she must speak out against Bill, she refuses to do so. That's when she says something very important in terms of free speech. She tells Dean Larson that firing Bill won't change *the underlying culture at the school*. [Erwin Chemerinsky and Howard Gillman](#) asked the question of *can free speech coexist with an inclusive campus environment* and addressed the tension between the desire to protect the learning experience of all students and the desire to safeguard freedom of expression. While one side focuses on all efforts to protect students from the effects of offensive or disrespectful speech as coddling and political correctness, the other side believes that free speech rights are secondary to the need to protect the learning experience of students, especially minority students. They believe that each one is of the same importance; colleges and universities must create inclusive learning environments for all students and protect freedom of speech. I am on the same page with them. As a candidate for the assistant professorship, I am feeling extreme anxiety about what can happen in the class. My reputation and also university reputation will be on the table... But what about free speech? When Bill told Ji-Yoon that he refused the settlement offer and will fight for his job back, I put myself in his shoes and I realised that I would do the same.

### ***Baby Boomers are trying to “deal with” younger generations: Intergenerational tensions...***

In the series, we can see that a young black female professor, Yazmin McKay, is up for tenure and budget cuts are in the air. There are three senior faculty members (who are all white) that are high-salaried with low course enrollments. One of them has to go so that Yazmin can get a Distinguished Scholarship. That's what the dean said. One male professor is literally always asleep. Elliot Rentz, another male senior faculty member, treats Yazmin like a teaching assistant rather than a co-professor. This issue shows that there is a visible intergenerational tension between Elliot and Yazmin.

When Elliot sees that Yazmin's class is full of students, this situation surprises him. As if that wasn't enough, during a discussion about Herman Melville in Yazmin and Elliot's joint class, a student asks about allegations of Melville beating his wife; he refuses to discuss the matter, but she says she will do the discussion in her section! When he witnesses her teaching style... this is another shock to the system! We can see that he disdains contemporary teaching methods. Later that day, he shares how he feels about the world he now lives in and his aging body with his wife, but doesn't criticize his own teaching abilities at all. Similarly, Joan's attitude for checking student evaluations shows that she is not interested in students' thoughts (they think that Joan's classes as well as Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales are very dull and boring). She is not aware of the fact that while those evaluations can be a bit harsh for her, some of them can be really valuable in terms of pedagogy. What does she do? She even meets with the IT guy to figure out who is posting negative reviews of her online and tracks the student! [A study](#) points out that many educators feel frustrated that millennials are especially difficult to reach and to motivate, so that teachers must engage them actively in the learning process. Yes, Joan hasn't lost her passion for her subject but she's clearly lost the ability to communicate that passion with the students. In a wider lens, older academics should be able to understand what younger generations request in terms of pedagogy. It is usually at this point that tensions between generations come to the fore.

### ***Sexism in academia***

The series touches on another point as well: being a woman in academia. I believe most of us can say that being a woman in academia is two times harder than being a man. We can see these issues in the example of Joan for instance. [As Tia Noelle Pratt beautifully described](#), “she never applied for promotion to full professor because like so many women, she took on a disproportional amount of departmental service such as committee work, at the expense of her research.” And yet, she is the one who was picked to move to that damp basement office, not one of her male colleagues. Ji-Yoon's own words tell so much for sexism in academia as well: “I feel like someone handed me a ticking time bomb because they wanted to make sure a woman was holding it when it explodes.”

When pandemic is over, will there be serious changes in academia? I doubt so. Here, I cannot help but quote Ji-Yoon again: “The world is burning and we're sitting here worried about our endowment.”

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*This post first appeared on the Post-Pandemic University Blog, as [THE CHAIR: A WALK THROUGH THE HALF-DIM CORRIDORS OF 'THE ACADEMIA'?](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).*

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