

Parkinson's Law and the Production of STEM Ph.D. Graduates in PH

On the 19th of November 1955, Cyril Northcote Parkinson (1909–1993) published in *The Economist* (economist.com) a humorous article on why government bureaucracies tend to grow without necessarily improving the quality of life of their stakeholders. The article entitled “Parkinson’s Law” was reprinted together with other essays in a book on public administration (Parkinson 1957).

Parkinson's Law states that the number of new employees that will be hired within a given time frame increases quickly with the number of in-house employees who will get promoted as a consequence, and is directly proportional to the gap between the ages of appointment of the new hires and retirement. On the other hand, the number is inversely proportional with the significance of the work to be done. Hence, the less impactful the job is, the more employees are hired and possibly paid with the lowest wage allowed.

My awareness of the existence of Parkinson’s Law came rather late in my professional life—only about twenty or so years ago when my research interests expanded to include the dynamics of complex adaptive social networks in the search of novel topics for my research students at the National Institute of Physics (NIP) and, perhaps naively, to make applied physics research closer to the hearts and minds of more people in the Philippines. Parkinson’s Law is unlike other physical laws such as the Newton’s Three Laws of Motion and his theory of gravitation or the conservation laws that are considered foundational and, therefore, sacrosanct in physics. Its accuracy and precision are hard to confirm experimentally—and maybe even riskier professionally and personally for the curious and crusading scientist. Huge amounts of reliable raw data are required that only bureaucracies themselves with the resources at their disposal are capable of gathering, organizing, and making available to the general public.

The essay is timeless and highly recommended for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) researchers who are constantly dealing and grappling with bureaucratic requirements to get their official appointments approved, research funding released, and procurement request consummated. For those who are retiring after many years of dedicated public service, Parkinson’s observations will help them approximate the amount of time involved in processing their retirement benefits. Long waits are the norm as middle-aged administrators postpone indefinitely the issuance of administrative clearance because the mechanical typewriter, magnetic hard disk, and even staplers issued to the care of the applicant a decade or two ago could not be located. These collector items and museum pieces were classified as equipment back in the days of yore when they were the cutting-edge technology. More often than not, the postponements are not due to a pending case in the Office of the Ombudsman or the Civil Service Commission.

Of course, our feared interim “guardians of the universe” are just doing their job. As a consequence of their zeal, senior-citizen employees will be leaving office feeling ungratefully abandoned towards joblessness, especially those who signed acquisition receipts representing millions of pesos in order to build research institutions that the zealots are enjoying at the moment. Without resorting to influence peddling or incessant ranting in the social media, hapless retirees should enjoy the fruits of their hard-earned labor well before the onset of Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s disease or even worse. This is commonsense especially for Filipinos whose life expectancy (68.6 years) is lower than the world’s average (70.8), which the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is not going to improve (Saloma 2018).

Parkinson pointed out that a typical office “old-timer” is convinced that he or she needs the help of at least two young deputies to get his or her job done. Soon enough, the sidekicks will become indispensable and each will doggedly request for the hiring of at least two assistants to traffic the documents that pass through their small individual tables. The said rationalization is repeated down the line, inevitably thickening and expanding the foliage of the tree of bureaucracy. Retirement is insufficient to decelerate the bloating since the average age of employees is getting younger with time.

His keen observations about the vagaries of a foreign bureaucracy continue to fascinate even in this work-from-home period of the Philippine bureaucracy. They enlighten us on why there are more positions for assistant secretaries and undersecretaries than secretaries in a department and why the present set-up of having only one (waiting) vice-president is inherently against the optimal functioning of the executive branch, particularly when that official and the Philippine president belong to opposing political parties.

When I was Dean of the College of Science (CS) in the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman from June 2006 to January 2011, I did not request for the appointment of an Associate Dean for Research and Development (ADRD), even though the said administrative position is in the organizational structure of the Office of the Dean (OD), and CS was in the middle of completing the National Science Complex. I was not convinced about the timeliness of an ADRD, given that the OD was not directly operating a research laboratory. It would be preposterous to ask the ADRD to visit NIP and coach its theorists on how to solve their research problems and, more so, if he hailed from another institute. Because the ADRD is a conscientious administrator, he would embark on something and ended up not just posting publications on the vanity board besides the entrance of his understaffed office but also inventing new forms and inserting a checkpoint in the procurement route of research supplies and equipment. The consequence (unintended, of course) of these well-meaning initiatives would be to burden the faculty even more with additional forms to fill up and to slow down further the time-sensitive procurement process. The added expenditure of energy by all concerned parties was essentially for naught, since it would not increase the number of Ph.D. graduates produced by the CS.

Accepting an administrative assignment within the academic bureaucracy is a zero-sum game due to the law of diminishing returns. A Ph.D. faculty who is on administrative assignment will have less time to mentor Ph.D. students unless she is exceptionally healthy and gifted as a researcher, mentor, and administrator. Administrative work—being physically and mentally demanding—is duly recognized by the award of administrative load credits. For instance, the workload for teaching and research of a regular UP faculty is 12 units. On the other hand, the administrative load credit given to a college dean and a chancellor is 9 and 12 units, respectively, because they are expected to focus on addressing the multidimensional challenges facing their respective units. The dean and the chancellor are just two of several positions with comparable load credits—there are others such as those for vice-chancellors, assistant vice-presidents, vice-presidents, *etc.*

UP Diliman, CS, and the College of Engineering produced 65.1 ± 15.4 , 12.53 ± 3.80 , and 5.73 ± 5.75 Ph.D. graduates per year, respectively, in the last 30 years ending AY 2019–2020. In June 2019, a total of 49 doctorate programs were offered in UP Diliman with a total of 607 regular Ph.D. faculty members in February 2020 (Saloma 2020). It can be surmised from the figures that some doctoral programs were consistently underperforming and that not all Ph.D. faculty members were able to mentor Ph.D. students successfully towards graduation.

Parkinson's Law has spawned a number of deprecating corollaries and generalizations. Hopefully, none will be discovered in the future showing that the number of Ph.D. graduates produced within a given period is inversely proportional to the number of doctorate programs or of faculty members promoted to full professorship within the said period. The institution of a new Ph.D. degree program is a tedious process and justifiably so, since UP would like to offer programs that yield competent and independent Ph.D. graduates. On the other hand, I am not aware of a procedure for abolishing a grossly inefficient doctorate program and such lack of institutional courage is fertile ground for the spawning of another corollary—that the productivity of a Ph.D. program is inversely proportional to the number of Ph.D. faculty in that program, who are administrating for its success.

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