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A University of Western Melbourne

Discussion Paper

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Summa Academica ad artium rationem

I. Should there be a university in the western suburbs of Melbourne?

The western suburbs have distinctive cultural, ethnic, social and economic characteristics. Interaction of a university with these characteristics would enable their fuller potential to be realised to the advantage of both the people of the west and the larger community.

Although students are prepared to travel, access to higher education remains an important factor in determining their choice of tertiary institution (FIT Public Relations survey, 1988). With the growth envisaged in the population of the western suburbs during the next ten year further opportunities for tertiary study will be needed in the region. To maintain equality of opportunity it is desirable that these should be provided at university level.

The proportion of students continuing to higher education from western suburbs schools remains lower than that in the rest of the metropolitan region. A university attuned to the background and needs of these students would help to redress this inequity.

Objections:

1. As tertiary level study is already provided in the west by FIT and the Western Institute it would be preferable to develop these existing institutions rather than duplicate them or incorporate them in a new foundation.

Response:

These institutions are no generally perceived as equal to traditional universities and larger institutions such as RMIT. This leads to the diversion of the most able students to other regions.

The present institutions are no of sufficient size to demonstrate what they can offer, nor to carry out the study and research needed to support their teaching functions.

2. As all universities perform essentially the same function, there is no room for a specialized regional university, which would necessarily be perceived as second-rate.

Response:

The idea of universities as value-free communities of scholars engaged in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge is a myth. The choice of areas of teaching and research, as well as the methods followed, is influenced by the social and cultural context. A university which gave high priority in its teaching and research to the social, cultural, industrial and economic concerns of the western suburbs would be in a strong position to develop both public recognition and scholarly acknowledgement of its excellence across the range of disciplines.

II. Should FIT be a constituent part of a University of Western Melbourne?

FIT is already engaged in research and teaching across the whole range of disciplines offered in Australian universities, and offers specialist courses in a number of these areas. Its exclusion from any university in its region would implicitly reduce its status and devalue these courses, thus reducing opportunities for its students and diminishing the possibility of its continuing its support for social and industrial development in the west.

It is important that a new university have the opportunity from the first to concentrate all its resources on obtaining speedy recognition of its academic excellence. It is also important that the existing functions of FIT be maintained and developed. An attempt to set up a new university independent of FIT would be divisive and lead to wasteful competition between the two institutions.

Objection:

The distinctive nature of FIT as a regional technological institution would be jeopardised by any amalgamation.

Response:

The ability of FIT to maintain and develop its distinctive excellence depends on its maintaining both its regional pre-eminence and an adequate flow of resources. Neither would be secure if it were in competition with a regional university.

III. Should FIT become the university of Western Melbourne?

The objections to developing a new university independent of FIT apply with equal force to any attempt by FIT to develop alone. Both RMIT and the Western Institute, separately or together, would offer continuing competition, presumably with their own university status. Only a combination of the three offers a sufficient student population to resist competition from existing and proposed universities in the centre and east of Melbourne.

IV. What should be the characteristics of a university formed in the western suburbs from the amalgamation of FIT, RMIT and the Western Institute?

The new university should have a role, apart from its regional commitment, which would make it distinctive among Victoria's universities. The histories of both FIT and RMIT include commitment to social equity, technology and vocational education. This distinct tradition can be maintained by designating the amalgamated institution as a university of technology.

Objection.

A university of technology is a contradiction in terms, professing at once universality and narrow dedication to utilitarian principles.

Response.

This contradiction depends on an erroneous understanding of technology. Technology is neither the manipulation of machinery nor the mere application of knowledge to human needs, but is itself a form of knowledge. It differs from the pure sciences in that it seeks to explain the world not by not simple and universal rules but by accurate description of specific problems in their uniqueness and diversity. This description is informed but not bounded by scientific rules. It includes all the hard disciplines--engineering, evolutionary biology, literature, history, anthropology, ecology, economics, sociology, ludics, health studies, modelling. Its handmaidens are philosophy, mathematics, physics and chemistry. It is concerned not with solutions but with answers to problems--answers which account for all the known facts, but which are always tentative, contingent on the present state of knowledge which the application of the answer will itself change. A university of technology will therefore be concerned with every aspect of human knowledge, but its programs will be governed by an alertness to the issues which press on its immediate time and community. Its staff, like Newton, will see their every word and action as part of the endeavour to advance their society and its understanding of itself.

V. What is the function of a university of technology?

A University of Technology will offer a form of higher education suited to the needs of a technological society. These will, however, not be realized if the new institution allows its function to be circumscribed by narrowly bureaucratic and economic perceptions of national priorities or by concentrating on alleged technological imperatives. At best, the training of students in the manipulation of material technologies may allow Australia, temporarily, to gain some competitive advantage in international markets. Such advantage must, however, be at the expense of another nation, and is certain in its turn to be lost

as yet other countries adapt to use technology. It does not offer a way of Australia avoiding the prospect of becoming a nation increasingly divided itself between the wealthy and the others, and serving the rest of the world merely as a repository of cheap labour and expensive entertainment. The Australian economy and society will become healthy only as we learn to live in harmony with ourselves, our neighbours and our environment. We must learn to use technology to empower the individual and produce harmony rather than domination. This requires an education which recognizes technology as a form of knowledge rather than as a means of domination. It needs to be based on an understanding of the modern world created by technology, characterized by urbanism, technologism and dehumanization, and threatened by population, pollution and authoritarian power.

VI. What courses should a university of technology offer to the western suburbs?

Both elements of the title, university and technology, are equally important. The institution must therefore offer courses across the whole range of disciplines and at all levels, and at the same time ensure that all courses take regard of the nature of technology and technological change, its limitations and possibilities, and the human effects of change.

In the first place, all present courses would continue to be offered on their present sites. Growth, however, should be concentrated in areas providing new combinations, in particular combinations of science and technology or business and management with humanities, so extending the variety of opportunity to pursue courses meeting the government's objectives of enhancing vocational opportunities in business and technology. Courses should be developed in particular around information technology, and in trade, development and language studies related to Australia's position on the Pacific rim.

FIT would bring to the new university its strengths in computing and business science, health sciences, hospitality and tourism, physical education and recreation, Australian and cultural studies, urban studies, languages, building engineering, mechanical engineering, and electrical and electronic engineering. Other engineering and science courses offer the opportunity for the development of combined courses in such areas as civil engineering and urban studies or mechanical engineering and languages. The potential exists for the development of joint courses, leading ultimately to combined degrees, in education and science, education and arts, and arts and science.

VII. In what specific ways could a university of technology in western Melbourne contribute to the extension of knowledge, understanding and truth?

The extension of knowledge, understanding and truth depends on the application of fundamental study and research through teaching and developmental research. Such activities should reflect the technological bent as defined above.

In the present profile of the FIT the weakest element is fundamental research, and the strengths are application through teaching and applied research. A university of technology would need to redress this imbalance by contributing to the basis of its own knowledge.

The research and development activities of FIT and of the other probable components of a university in western Melbourne overlap existing faculties and departments. These strengths could be best developed by grouping them in two centres: one concerned with research and policy studies and the other with applied research and commercial developments.

The Centre for Research and Policy Studies would be expected to nurture graduate studies and develop interdisciplinary programs for undergraduate courses. Its staffing would be provided by secondment from staff in academic departments, visiting fellows, contract research workers and graduate students. It would comprise four units:

Economic Policy: development studies, economic planning, social justice, operations research, systems analysis;

Technology Policy: policy studies relating to the consequences of technological change and the development and application of technology to Australian industry and environment;

Australian Studies: media and cultural studies, women's studies, urban studies, languages and communications (Note: the AIMA and John White collections now in the FIT Library provide a solid basis for these activities)

Health and Leisure Studies: sports studies, patterns of leisure and social development, preventive and therapeutic care.

Appendix

Relationship of proposed university of technology to criteria for recognition as a university?

Recognition must come from four sources. The state must legislate for it. The commonwealth must agree to fund it. The Australian Vice-Chancellor's committee must accept it for membership. The association of Commonwealth Universities must accept it for membership. Each of these bodies has different criteria.

1. The Victorian government has not stated its criteria for university status, but it has stated its criteria for approving the amalgamation of any institutions. A university based on the amalgamation of FIT with RMIT and Western Institute would appear to meet these--an amalgamation with only Western Institute would be less likely to do so.

Briefly, the new institution would match the criteria of the Victorian government as follows:

1. It would strengthen equity in the western suburbs and provide support for the industrial and developmental strategies of both the government and the Western Region Commission.

2. It builds on the strengths of FIT which have been indicated above, and on the complementary strengths of RMIT in the material computing and information management and communications and on Western Institute in providing access.

3. All existing programs would be maintained, but the opportunity would be created for better co-ordination.

4. The Commonwealth support required would be that needed to provide for anticipated growth in student numbers and to allow RMIT to develop beyond its present site; the need to update equipment, particularly in engineering and computing, could be rationalized between the component institutions.

5. Provided that faculties are amalgamated and a single administrative system developed there additional costs should be limited to travel and the provision of parallel library resources, and should be offset by savings in administration.

6. Courses at both FIT and RMIT are unable to satisfy the present demand from students; larger course numbers would provide the flexibility to provide differential teaching and so to increase completion rates; single faculties would be able to develop common course structures and so enable full credit to be given to students transferring between like courses.

7. The continuation of existing courses and guarantees of terms of employment as provided for in the agreement between Melbourne University and Melbourne CAE would meet the requirements of higher education unions and clients.

8. The establishment of the university would provide support for the economy of the western region and extend the opportunities available to its citizens for both education and employment; it would complement universities already established in the other quarters of Melbourne and maintain valuable diversity within the whole system of higher education in the state;

9. The proposal would maintain the present regional and industrial focus of FIT;

10. The organisational model proposed in the earlier submission from FIT, RMIT and Swinburne provides the basis for an amalgamation, provided that further attention were given to academic career structures and to the protection of the autonomy of courses and research;

The Queensland government has spelled out more clearly the requirements of university status. Neither FIT nor the amalgamated institution could on current propositions to meet the requirement that it should be a community of scholars pursuing knowledge, understanding and truth in a disinterested and objective way. However, the basis for such a community is present in the Institute's activities in teaching, research, consultancies and publication. Each of these however needs qualitative development. In particular, the Institute needs to free itself from a merely service mentality and develop among both students and staff a commitment to critical thought within the areas of their expertise.

2. The commonwealth government would need to recognize a new university for funding purposes. The framework of the Unified National System provides a means by which this recognition could be obtained.

3. The AVCC requires both that a university be established by act of parliament and that it meet standards of academic quality, that it have breadth and depth in course offerings, that it meet national, international and professional standards for its awards and that it have adequate resources to support its awards. The awards offered at FIT would meet these criteria, research and publication need further development, particularly in the direction of more fundamental research, and with the completion of the present building program resources will be closer to adequate. The act of parliament should be passed if the university meets the state's criteria as specified.

4. The criteria for membership of the Association of Commonwealth Universities would be met by the passing of the appropriate act.