

The New University?

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Nothing, as Mr Dawkins is discovering, is harder to change than higher education. Most academics are justly proud of what they achieve despite the parsimony of government, and properly resent interference by outsiders who display no evidence of understanding the true business of education. But their defensive rhetoric too easily rewrites history and distorts the social environment in which they work. As a consequence, their defence is in danger of destroying the very values they prize.

The attempt by the Australian Vice-Chancellors to define the nature of a true university is an example of this defensive process. Their arithmetical measures of qualifications and publications assume that quantity guarantees excellence. Their emphasis on refereed journals and research grants restricts the definition of academic production to their own fields, ignoring alternative forms of production in such fields as the fine arts, music, and even engineering. In other words, new universities must resemble the old, rather than following, for example, North American models.

At the same time, the Vice-Chancellors ignore the actual changes in the nature of their own institutions. The oldest Australian universities--Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide--were all founded as peoples' universities intended to be democratic institutions very different from the then moribund models of Oxford or Cambridge. This intent was quickly subverted by the custom of appointing overseas professors who were intent in

reshaping the colonies in their own image. Only after the second world war did Australian universities start to acquire a significant research capacity, and only much later did they start generally to recognize their Australian environment.

Significantly, the Vice-Chancellors' document makes no reference to academic freedom or autonomy. This omission reflects the managerial revolution which is taking control of universities from the academics and putting it in the hands of administrators responding to government directives and to vested interests in business and the professions. This is the one part of the Dawkins program which is working.

Similarly, the emphasis on professional rather than general publication marks a retreat to the academy, the wish for comfortable conformity which was the hallmark of Australian universities and their administrators for the greater part of their existence. There is no room for the free thinker and activist in the managerial university.

The official responses of the college directors similarly fail to come to grips with the obligations of higher education institutions. In asserting the differences of colleges from universities they adopt an attitude to industry which borders on the servile. In asserting their equality, they ignore the conditions of their own excellence.

These failures are reflected in the confused public discussion about the possibilities of amalgamating the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, the Footscray Institute of Technology and the Western Institute in a new university of

technology with a particular commitment to the needs and interests of Melbourne's western suburbs.

Like Melbourne University, RMIT was founded as an institution for the people. As the Workingmen's College it provided a facility for both men and women to overcome the economic deprivation and social prejudice which prevented them from using their talents to the benefit of society. Its subsequent development maintained this commitment.

The insistence by some 'Friends of RMIT' that the word Royal be retained in the title of any new institution is an example of the worst kind of Victorian cringe. It denies the Institute's own history, which in itself gives the lie to the claim that there is any incompatibility between excellence and equity.

RMIT has a proud history and has undoubtedly achieved excellence in many spheres. That alone does not make it a university. Nor is it necessary, in asserting its own excellence, to deny that of others.

FIT also has a record of over 70 years' service both to students from the western suburbs and to learning. During this time it has, like RMIT, had to resist the attempts of state officials to deny working class children a full education in the fields of their choice. It this effort has achieved its own forms of excellence both in meeting the needs of students from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds and in achieving the highest academic and professional standards.

Similarly, the Western Institute, despite poor facilities, is establishing courses which enable students from otherwise deprived backgrounds to develop their abilities to our common

benefit. It is a part of the same tradition of equity and excellence as RMIT and FIT.

The plan to bring these three institutions together in a new form of university is an opportunity for all three to go a further stage in developing this tradition. All three are handicapped by lack of money, but all three also need the opportunity to develop the free discourse between disciplines which is the basis of a true university.

The obligation of such a university to recognize the special interests of the west is not a form of social engineering, nor does it contradict its need to achieve academic excellence. Rather, ~~they~~^{it} acknowledges that excellence always has both a material and social context.

The knowledge developed and taught in universities and colleges is always shaped by the perceptions of the students and teachers it engages. In the past, these perceptions have neglected the social and material environment of people in the western suburbs. As a consequence, their lives have been shaped, not by social engineers, but by the material engineers and business managers who have decided that these areas should be a dumping ground for the rest of Melbourne, and have at the same time denied them the financial resources and public facilities to give them control of their own destiny. The excellence achieved by a university which has a special responsibility for this region should offer some guarantee that future graduates will not repeat these mistakes of their predecessors from the comfortable suburbs of the east.

But most importantly, a university developed from the traditions of these three institutions offers the possibility of restoring the traditional ideal of a university. Technical institutions teach students how to use technology, while technological education is about teaching people what technology is all about. A university which treats technology as both product and determinant of our human culture can recover the values of common discourse which the modern managerial university too often locks away into separate compartments.

These values will not come easily. They demand a continuing resistance to the managerial and utilitarian demands emanating from Canberra. But they will not be achieved at all if we rest on the illusory comforts of past achievements rather than refashion them to meet the demands of the future. The proposal for a new university offers us the chance to refashion our strengths for this end.

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