

Where do universities go from here?

After the Green and White papers, the demise of the binary system, the creation of the Unified National System and much debate, RODNEY NILLSEN, a senior lecturer in mathematics at the University of Wollongong, asks: What are universities for?

GREG Sheridan's article, Just what is a University? (*The Weekend Australian*, October 22-23), is welcome in that it considers the fundamental question which has been produced by the present debate on tertiary education, but which nevertheless has not been explicitly considered to any extent.

The question admits no easy answer, nor, indeed, one which could ever be universally accepted as a complete and accurate statement of the function of a university.

It is nevertheless important to ask this question continually, particularly for those in university life - for it is only by so doing that universities can maintain their distinctive role in society and a clear sense of direction.

It is largely because universities have ignored this question that they have been so ill-prepared to defend their view of the distinctiveness of their function in the face of an uncomprehending government and society.

Universities also tended to ignore for a long period outside criticism of their activities, as though their worth and achievements were self-evident. Such illusions now have surely been shattered and make it all the more urgent that we endeavour to clarify the proper function of a university.

Greg Sheridan's article contains a number of criticisms and perceptions of universities which are not only his own but are probably shared by many others.

While it may be difficult to regard some of these as well-informed, they are often deeply held and possibly so widespread that they have contributed in no

Comment

small part to the present crisis in universities.

The criticisms of universities can be seen to be of two types: First, they have not been sufficiently economically and socially productive, hence the Government's Green and White Papers; and second, they have failed to be true to their function as they themselves have seen it.

It is the problems raised by this second type of criticism which are mainly considered here.

Society has serious problems in understanding and accepting the analytical and critical functions of universities, perhaps because it is these which may be directed against society itself. There is a tendency to expect universities simply to bolster up the existing order, and not to question it.

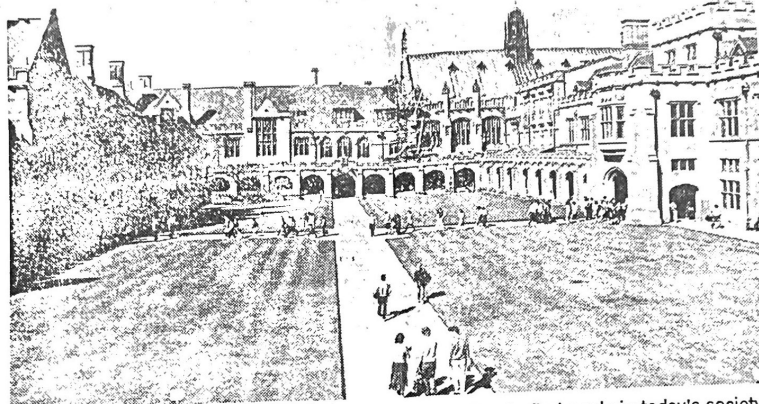
Ignored

At one extreme, this feeling manifests itself as an assertion that university staff hate their own society and that they are more committed to undermining it than they are to the pursuit of learning and knowledge.

Another emerging criticism of universities in Australia (possibly influenced by Allan Bloom's recent book, *The Closing of the American Mind*), is that they have ignored the best ideas of the past in their pursuit of the true and the good, and consequently have lost their high sense of moral purpose.

I accept the validity of this criticism with some qualifications, but when it is put in extreme form (which it sometimes is) there is the implication that universities should only "pass on" the ideas of the past.

This would mean that our uni-



Changing emphasis . . . university campuses are struggling to find a role in today's society

versities would become mere museums of past ideas, a notion that sits comfortably with the attitude that they should keep quiet and be grateful for such funds as they receive and get on with activities which are easily understood and have immediate social benefits.

The correct response to these views seems to be similar in each case. The great ideas of the past should be honoured, but not enshrined. They are important because they are still "alive", and our attitude to them should be that they are living things.

But this means that they need to be re-examined, criticised, tested, looked at again and again, with the faith and hope that new and living ideas will emerge which will shed new insights and even improvements upon the old.

This faith and hope, together with a belief in the value of this striving, is one of the distinguishing marks of the university. This is what John Henry Newman in his classic work, *The Idea of a University*, referred to as "a great and firm belief in the sovereignty of truth".

But even if universities do endeavour to clarify their distinguishing functions, and even if they accept that they are along the lines envisaged by Newman, so that they are more committed to communicating to their students and society the search for that truth and objectivity which lies outside and beyond the individual, they will still face enormous barriers to carrying those functions out.

Responsive

The attitudes of young students have been much more strongly moulded by powerful and anti-pathetic cultural forces, notably the mass media - and at an earlier age - than ever before.

Under such circumstances, it is simply unrealistic to expect that students will suddenly appreciate that the university and the

grasping of truth may be able to provide them with values and experiences which may hold them in good stead throughout their lives.

Universities doubtless could have done more to overcome these problems, but what some of their critics must realise is that many of the concerns they have are due to the fact that universities have been too responsive to some of the pressures put upon them, and thus have become more like the rest of society.

They will be unable to recover their high sense of moral purpose if society does not regard this as something of value and importance for itself in general, and for universities in particular.

The problems of identity and function within universities are therefore symptoms of similar problems in the whole of society. While universities have a par-

ticular responsibility to endeavour to solve these wider problems, it would be a gross over-simplification to say they have caused them.

The Government's policy, as described in the White Paper, will only exacerbate these problems, since it is designed to make universities more like the rest of society, thus making it more difficult to counter the tendency of society to prefer the immediate and the tangible.

The White Paper is concerned mainly with introducing centralised control, and with using universities as a tool for social and economic engineering.

It shows little concern with quality or with the value of education as an activity in its own right, and it shows not the slightest serious interest in the proper function of the university; it displays no awareness that society may benefit by having a range of institutions with diverse values and functions; and it contains no analysis of why our universities are considered to have failed and very little awareness of their achievements.

If universities are to maintain their distinctive identity and, in the face of government-determined imperatives, are not to become little more than quasi-governmental educational and research institutions, they face a daunting dilemma.

How do they respond to the demands of economic and material relevance, while simultaneously re-asserting the validity and value of their traditional conceptions of their proper function?

Given the present pressures, there is a point beyond which such a successful response will be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

If that point has not passed, it is surely imminent.