

Chapter 2

To the limits of acceptability: political control of higher education

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Over 2,000 years ago Aristotle observed that humans are political animals. In a more recent discussion, politics was defined as “who gets what, when, how,”¹ and if we apply this proposition to higher education, it is clear that higher education is highly political. In this chapter I will consider a number of examples of how in the exercise of power policy-makers have pushed universities to the limits of acceptability and sometimes beyond. What are the limits of acceptability and what are the consequences of exceeding them? A useful metaphor sees a university as a ship² (an adaptation of the conventional “ship of state”). I am not going to argue that universities should be or could be totally exempt from any political interference, rather that, like courts of law or hospitals, certain kinds of inappropriate interference by politicians or their appointees are highly damaging to the performance of the essential tasks of these institutions. For a university to maintain its standing as a university, it must operate within certain parameters of academic acceptability; just as a ship must remain within certain hydrodynamic parameters to stay afloat. Academic parameters are more difficult to locate, because, unlike ships, universities rarely sink without trace. Nevertheless, gross breaches of procedure can grievously damage an institution’s standing, with disastrous consequences for students and staff, present and past, and a community at large. The Orr Affair was such a disaster, demonstrating the consequences of a University overturning its keel of acceptability by the inappropriate action of lay members of its Council and, sadly, some academic staff members too. The bitter discussion it generated can still injure the

reputation of individuals connected with the University of Tasmania nearly half a century later.

This chapter has relevance to the legacy of the Orr case when it analyses the long-term noxious consequences of deliberate decisions to exceed the parameters of academic acceptability. Unlike the maritime metaphor, where the parameters are fixed and can be calculated with accuracy, the parameters of academic acceptability are imprecise, somewhat mobile, and to some extent culture-bound. Even so, I will argue, as Rawls has done for the idea of justice, that certain minimal standards are timeless and universal.³ I will attempt to define the volatile popular ideal of a good university and its conduct, citing scholars from various periods. The testing of these conceptions in various political contexts will illustrate their effect on the reputation of the institutions concerned. I will also suggest that demands for greater control by current politicians, business leaders and the media are driving universities very close to the limits of acceptability, with consequences that in the long run will be very costly.

The concept of a university

A university in its basic form is a degree-awarding educational institution with some official recognition. The English word *university* comes from the original Latin words *unus*, one, and *vertere*, to turn, or the totality of all things that exist, which then became in medieval Latin *universitates facultatum*, or combination of all the faculties or branches of learning. The first university in the modern sense is believed by some to have been the medical school founded in the 9th century at Salerno, but the first with a precise founding date appears to have been the Alazhar University of Cairo in 970 A.D.,⁴ followed by those in Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge in the early 1000s. These early universities were allowed freedom to govern themselves providing they did not teach atheism or heresy and the European ones were granted the right to elect their own rectors and raise their own finances. Starting as religious educational bodies, what made them universities as distinct from seminaries was the admission of students from outside their own orders. The foundation dates of some other early universities were: Jagiellonian (Krakow) 1369, Barcelona 1450, Basel 1460, Uppsala 1477, Santo Domingo 1538, Pontifical Gregorian 1553, Harvard 1636, Toronto (as Kings College) 1754, Moscow 1755,

Sydney 1850, Melbourne 1853, Tokyo 1877, Tasmania 1896 and Peking 1898.

The popular ideal of a university could be conceived as being a place where knowledge is pursued by experts at the highest levels and where students of the greatest potential are selected for further training. One could also add an expectation that the academics give intellectual and moral leadership in providing expert opinions on issues important to the community. A university may also be seen as a centre for advanced research of public significance, thus justifying state finance. Current respect for universities is demonstrated by two-thirds of a survey of 1000 interviewees who believed that more should be spent on higher education.⁵ Ninety-two per cent of respondents in the same survey believed that university research is important for national prosperity.⁶ Most independent states, considering them an important resource, have at least one university. Governments also see universities as sources of prestige, similar to national airlines, which as Readings⁷ demonstrates, both provide transport and carry the national flag abroad.

The popular conception of a university is not in conflict with the views of academic writers. The views of Orr's 1954 letter to the Tasmanian Premier (see following Chapter) echoed many authorities. Cardinal Newman wrote that a university should teach all branches of knowledge, including theology, and opposed restrictions of any kind on subject matter.⁸ The secular/non-secular debate is no longer considered relevant in Western societies, and it has been noted that among those universities which started as theological institutions there has been generally an abandonment of close denominational connections.⁹ A former Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, Lord Bullock, considered universities remarkable in their scope, bringing the three great traditions of scholarship, teaching and research to the whole range of human knowledge.¹⁰ Another ex-Vice-Chancellor, this time of London University, endorsed the ideals of objectivity, judgement and the common element in civilisations,¹¹ insisting that such a university be open to all talents.

The need for intellectual and moral leadership on important issues is acknowledged though it is rarely realised in today's society which has been described as a pluralistic one where "we are no longer sure of moral and spiritual truths,"¹² and also as one which has entered a postmodern stage where any hierarchy of knowledge or value has been abandoned in favour the material, the economic and the market-

driven.¹³ Respect for dissent is a long-term university ideal and its suppression clearly exceeds the parameters of academic acceptability. Many countries have seen universities become centres of mass demonstration and their public generally tolerate conflict but within recognisable parameters. This excludes murder, assassination or lethal force by police or army. The popular and academic ideal of a university thus demands an environment of scholarly enquiry seeking the highest levels of truth and providing intellectual and moral leadership. Upset and upheaval short of physical violence can be tolerated. Violence may include both physical violence to terminate argument and bureaucratic violence, which rejects reasoned discussion. The Orr case, beginning with criticism of the University council, led to an assassination attempt on Orr. Little difference appears between the popular and the academic specialist ideals of a university except when elaborated. The ideal parameter of academic acceptability can be stated as: *the pursuit of truth and the provision of intellectual and moral leadership while avoiding the extremes of physical violence.*

Historical cases of exceeding the limits of acceptability

The pursuit of truth may seem an obvious *raison d'être* of universities but it cannot be taken for granted, particularly when it leads to a conflict with a politically imposed ideology. The Third Reich was predicated on the assumption of inherent “Aryan,” (interpreted as *German*), superiority over “non-Aryan” peoples such as Jews, Gypsies and many others. Such superiority was highlighted in the fields of intellectual and scientific discovery. Accordingly, Einstein’s physics required replacement by a racially acceptable physics. Even the Hertz, a unit of physical measurement, was abolished because it was named after a Jewish scientist.¹⁴ Sadly, the hitherto distinguished Professor Lenart, a Nobel laureate, with the support of fellow Nobel Laureate Professor Stark, created a new mystical entity which they called “German physics.” Other distinguished scientists such as Heisenberg, Sommerfeld and Planck were denounced as “white Jews.”¹⁵ The famous Göttingen school of quantum physicists was dispersed. Germany accordingly lost its world leadership in natural science to the United States where many of the persecuted distinguished scientists relocated, taking with them the precious knowledge which had been considered “racially impure.”

Openness of access is another basic parameter of university acceptability. During South Africa's Apartheid period, 1948-90, higher education was segregated and two separate sets of institutions developed. This racial policy gradually forced the established universities to shed their non-white students and staff, if they had any. In 1957, the University of Cape Town had 4,782 students of whom 456 were non-whites, the University of Witwatersrand had 4,677 of whom 214 were non-whites, and the University of Stellenbosch had 3,335 students all of whom were white.¹⁶ Parallel to this development, special university colleges for non-whites were created, and, to uphold ideological consistency, the Act creating them stated that "No white person shall register with or attend any [Non-white] university college as a student."¹⁷ Many of the university Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors and senior and junior staff, mindful of the effect of racial restrictions on the reputation of their institution, not to mention their own sense of decency, showed intellectual and moral leadership in the face of an authoritarian and racist regime. The Chancellor of the University of Cape Town wrote that the restrictions "would very seriously damage the status and reputation these universities enjoyed in the world."¹⁸ The councils of the Universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand passed resolutions condemning the restrictions, as did a group of professors and lecturers at Stellenbosch.¹⁹ However the Council of the University of Stellenbosch did not join in this protest. Many of the African students who attended the new colleges, which later became universities, were frustrated by the white domination of the National Union of South African students. In 1969, under the presidency of the charismatic Steve Biko who later died in police custody, they split to form their own all-black South African Students' Organisation.²⁰

The 1993 Constitution of South Africa created a non-racial state. Higher education has entered a process of transformation through a Reconstruction and Development Programme. Recognising the importance of universities to South Africa's national aspirations, President Mandela described them as "vital national assets, belonging to all South Africans."²¹ South Africa's universities have now ended their long period of isolation from the world's intellectual community. Apartheid itself was a form of physical violence.

Academic freedom requires some preservation of a university's continuity of courses, staff and research specialisations from arbitrary external authority. The closure by amalgamation or simple disbandment represents a severe reduction in the status and value of its former

awards. Under totalitarian regimes such as the Third Reich, whole disciplines were banned, as was sociology, or severely downgraded, as were theology and law.²² In addition, some 1200 academics were dismissed by the regime on grounds of race, religion, politics or other inappropriate criteria, including false accusations motivated by professional jealousy.²³ These processes clearly violated the credibility, as places of intellectual enquiry, of German universities under that regime.

The independence of a university to establish and control its own curriculum is an important ideal. In the vigorous debate over the United Kingdom's Education Bill of 1988 the Secretary of State sought to centralise control over universities by gaining powers "to attach such conditions as he may determine" to the income provided to the University Funding Council, and to make universities "bound to comply with such terms." In response, the Association of University Teachers responded by expressing the fear that "in the face of this system of statutory controls, the traditional independence of universities will be severely curtailed."²⁴ Although modified by the House of Lords, the Bill was subsequently enacted in substantially its original form and the United Kingdom's universities have, as a result, undoubtedly suffered some loss of independence and credibility.

The continuity of employment of individual staff and groups of staff is a most important aspect of the ideal of a university. Often called *tenure*, meaning the legal right to hold a piece of property or office, (from the French *tenir*, to hold), this practice has a long history, in and out of academia. It has caused much controversy in the past and is under a cloud at present. In the Orr case it was central to the University's summary dismissal of a professor after the dubious procedures described in Chapter 3.²⁵

To Max Weber (1864-1920), the architect of the modern concept of bureaucracy, tenure was an essential characteristic of a rational-legal organisation:

Normally, the position of the official is held for life, at least in public bureaucracies; and this is increasingly the case for all similar structures... In contrast to the worker in private enterprise, the official normally holds tenure.²⁶

Tenure was seen by Weber as an essential characteristic of a bureaucracy, alongside training, entry examinations and adequate remunera-

tion in a hierarchical career structure. In university organisation, Weber emphasised the need for academic freedom in the pursuit of excellence, and objective appointment criteria and tenure to achieve this:

In order to speak seriously of such "freedom", the first condition which must obviously be met is that both appointment to and continued tenure in a chair must be decided by the same [academic] criteria.²⁷

Weber's ideal model was prescribed after a lifetime of study indicated it to be the most efficient type of organisation. It has been adopted in many forms throughout the world. Today, despite the tendency of governments to substitute a politicised model of bureaucratic appointment, which naturally impacts on academic selection, tenurable selection retains strong advocates. As the negotiations between the Staff Association and the University of Tasmania Council, described by Solomon, indicated, there is a powerful belief that fundamental freedom to pursue university ideals requires immunity from dismissal on grounds of race, religion, ideology or arbitrary factors. As well as those occurring under dictatorships, there have been many notorious instances of breaking continuing appointment by dismissal, nonrenewal or other means.

Two widely publicised dismissals from academic positions on political grounds in the United States in 1917 led, two years later, to a strong movement for the institutionalisation of a system of tenure in that country. It also brought about a new institution which achieved great prestige, the New School for Social Research. On October 8, 1917, the famous historian Charles A. Beard resigned from Columbia University in protest over the dismissal of two colleagues, Professors Cattell and Dana, for having publicly opposed the entry of the United States into World War I. Cattell and Dana urged opposition to the draft, incurring the censure of Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler and the Columbia Board of Trustees. There had also been a history of conflict over academic leadership and governance between Butler and Cattell, a distinguished psychologist. Despite the controversy over the departure in protest of Beard and the other academics, Columbia survived, but so did the New School, through the efforts of its founders and some wealthy patrons. On a smaller scale, the University of Tasmania had a similar problem in 1915 when the

Council considered dismissing the eminent economic historian, Herbert Heaton, for asserting that there were faults on both sides in World War I.²⁸

An interesting contemporary case is that of Robert Faurisson, an historian who became “absolutely sure” that there were no homicidal gas chambers used by the Nazis during the period of the Third Reich. Professor Faurisson was suspended from his position at the University of Lyons and currently faces prosecution under the 1990 Fabius-Gayssot law which forbids anyone to contest the finding of “crimes against humanity” as defined and punished by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg in 1945-46.²⁹ The Faurisson Affair has elicited a vigorous defence of the right to freedom of expression from the eminent radical academic Noam Chomsky. Chomsky, himself of Jewish descent, describes the Holocaust as “the most fantastic outburst of collective insanity in human history.” But Chomsky recalls the sentence in Voltaire’s famous letter to M. le Riche, “I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write.” Chomsky observes further that “it is a poor service to the memory of the victims of the holocaust to adopt a central doctrine of their murderers.” The Faurisson Affair thus simultaneously raises the two related ideals of freedom from dismissal and freedom of expression, which still generate considerable controversy.

The Faurisson case has a parallel in the United States. A tenured associate professor of engineering at Northwestern University at Evanston, Ill., has allegedly used the school’s computer system to create a Web page arguing that the atrocities of the Holocaust have been greatly exaggerated. Despite a number of calls for his dismissal, the University has not taken action against this academic, apparently on grounds of academic freedom. But after an untenured engineering instructor at the same University denounced these views in class, the school did not renew his contract. This case differs from that of Faurisson because Faurisson was a professional historian and therefore his competence is a legitimate question, whereas the United States academic was employed as an engineer, and his historical views, no matter how bizarre, are irrelevant to his competence as an academic engineer.

The non-renewal of this contract, if related to debating an historical subject, seriously breach the ideals of freedom of expression and freedom from arbitrary dismissal (through non-renewal).

This case, whatever its motivation, undermines the ideal of a university in another way: the increasing use of part-time non-tenure track, or casual, staff. In the USA these are currently estimated as 43 per cent of all instructors, about twice the rate of two decades ago.³⁰ The huge impetus towards casualising university academic staff to break tenure comes from the desire for greater managerial flexibility, and cost savings. Sometimes these savings are recycled at the other end of the staffing scale allowing higher salaries for top academics. Writing of the USA, Wilshire noted that by the use of part-time instructors

A permanent class of gypsy scholars threatens to be created ... This practice is particularly shameful when it is also employed to compensate for exorbitant salaries paid to a few "superstars." That market pressures should have so distorted the research university is a measure, of course, of its moral collapse.³¹

In 1917 public opinion was significantly disturbed by the cases of Cattell and Dana, but today's public opinion has been indoctrinated in current managerial insistence on labour market flexibility. Support for Faurisson may be based on agreement with his anti-holocaust views rather than Chomsky's Voltairian freedom of expression. In other cases there may be more sympathy from those opposed to managerialism, and supportive of continuity of employment and freedom from arbitrary dismissal in a university. This is a less advanced limit of university acceptability than the absolute tenure implicit in Chomsky's defence of Faurisson.

Violence, whether the physical intervention of an authoritarian government or a substitution of top-down managerial authority for reasoned debate, which usually lies behind unfair dismissal, completely undermines institutions of higher learning. Not only does it damage their international reputation but also has deleterious effects on the creation and maintenance of an ambiance conducive to teaching and research through collaborative enterprise often called "collegiality."

Of more serious consequence than random and isolated incidents of loss of continuity of employment (though academics like Sydney Orr and David Rindos may be driven to early graves) is actual loss of life in a university caused by military intervention by the State. There are many tragic examples of this. On May 4, 1970, National Guards fired

upon a crowd of students at the Kent State University demonstrating against US involvement in the Vietnam War, leaving four students dead and nine injured. The National Guard had been called by the Mayor of Kent after he had declared a state of emergency. Since the University was State property, the Commanding Officer of the National Guard did not believe it necessary to contact University administration before entering the campus. The incident had many highly regrettable long-term consequences, not only for those immediately involved but also for the University itself. University staff passed a resolution condemning the National Guard's action, and stated "in this moment of grief, we pledge that in the future we shall not teach in circumstances which are wounding of our students. . . We can – and do – refuse to teach in a climate that is inimical to the safety of our students and to the principles of academic freedom."³² The killing of these students and two more later the same month at Jackson State College had moral, political and legal implications that were deep and long lasting, and show the harmful repercussions for the institutions concerned when violence occurs within their precincts.

In his memoirs, a leading scholar at Oxford University has described how he had "no qualms about causing the death (by suicide) of a fellow from whose non-existence the college would benefit."³³ Though unusual in candour, this incident is not an isolated one. Such callous attitudes indicate the deterioration of the ideals of collegiality and fair play within the heart of academia. Some of Orr's colleagues in Tasmania were moved more by their individual antipathy to Orr, than by the principles at stake, when he was dismissed. Likewise at Newcastle in 1980 Michael Spautz received little collegial support for his whistle-blowing (see Chapter 9). Such callous or don't-wish-to-know behaviour in academics provides a fifth column, facilitating outside interference. In many universities it is common for staff and students to be lost through violence: the University of Lagos loses one or two academics by murder each year, but the institution carries on.³⁴

Globally changing parameters of academic acceptability

The metaphor of seaworthiness, to recall, emphasised basic parameters of continued functioning: in the case of universities, these are ones of intellectual integrity, openness of access, continuity of employment and physical safety, which cannot be abandoned. The Orr

Affair, by exceeding these parameters of acceptability ended in a “disastrous conflict.”³⁵ But the Affair was also an early example of globalisation in that the English-speaking academic world became involved in demanding new parameters of acceptability through a pre-internet network of meetings, resolutions, telegrams and letters leading to the black-listing of the University of Tasmania Philosophy Chair for a decade. But globalisation in academia works in more than one direction: it allows the early detection of a breach of the standards of acceptability, but it also allows for a widespread lowering of the standards of acceptability. This it does through a universal increase in the tolerance of non-academic structures and processes. If a particular institution is careful not to stand out as a pacesetter in the lowering of standards, its gradual erosion of academic acceptability will not attract attention.

The recent development of electronic information storage and transfer known as the Information Technology (IT) Revolution has led to a great acceleration in globalisation. This process has fundamentally changed academia. While there is a time lag in the non-anglo-phone world, and peripheral countries like Ireland (see Gwynn), Australia has followed worldwide trends. Globalisation, it is argued, is Americanisation, a reproduction of American society “not a neutral process in which Washington and Dakar participate equally.”³⁶ Despite the location of most critics of academic globalisation in the United States itself, the process has developed more fully there than elsewhere. The United Kingdom and Australia follow close behind while Canada, perhaps surprisingly in view of its geography, has remained considerably removed.³⁷ The emergence of the English language since World War II to an unchallenged pre-eminence among languages of wider communication is both a product and a cause of globalisation. Worldwide convergence in higher education is identifiable in independent states, which confidently implement policies to reduce or eliminate tenure, and promote through administrative force (though not physical violence), academic corporatisation³⁸, privatisation and user-pays systems.

Corporatisation assimilates universities to large business organisations and enables them to be run as such. For example Ford Motors entered a partnership with Ohio State University on the assumption the “the mission(s) of the university and the corporation are not that different.”³⁹ While Ford Motors cannot be expected to address questions of value judgement or morality, the corporate university can

likewise eschew them, and pursue “excellence” which in practice means technical excellence. Many corporatised universities have adopted mission statements which formally commit themselves to the vague term “excellence,” sometimes alternating with the equally subjective word “quality.” So widespread has this commitment been that even such an ancient and prestigious institutions as New College, Oxford, has embraced it.⁴⁰ The identical mission has even crossed the language barrier to the Université de Montréal.⁴¹ Excellence is not confined to academic pursuits: it has been reported that the Cornell University Parking Services recently received an award for “excellence in parking.”⁴² The use of excellence as a generic category of acceptability is problematic in that it disguises value judgements. An “excellent” value judgement is meaningless. It has been argued that a university committed to “excellence” is an oxymoron as the term excludes values and implies only technical expertise: “excellence marks nothing more than the moment of technology’s self-reflection.”⁴³

In addition to the remodelling of universities as value-free, corporatised institutions of technical excellence, sometimes called the *university of excellence*,⁴⁴ the *entrepreneurial university*,⁴⁵ or the *techno-corporate university*,⁴⁶ are the principles of user-pays and user rights or student consumerism. In many countries costs of higher education are now being transferred from the State to the user, the student, as has been done traditionally in the United States. It is of relevance to note that the Higher Education Contribution Scheme introduced in Australia in the late 1980s has been introduced to the United Kingdom.⁴⁷

The idea that a university provides a “product” to be “consumed” like any other pervades the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; but allowing the market place to determine academic priorities endangers academic credibility. A public perception still exists that a university should provide intellectual leadership, not just follow trends. To resolve this problem, various measures of quality control have been introduced, interpreting excellence as accountability. TQM (Total Quality Management), “added value” and “performance by indicators”⁴⁸ have been developed with particular refinement in the United Kingdom.

Many educators believe that assessment of courses, academics, departments and even universities by students (or “consumers”) is necessary and long overdue. But critics of the system note that over-

use of student evaluations undermines academic standards by creating a need to please and to give ever-higher grades.⁴⁹ Furthermore, they undermine disciplines, incurring the criticism that “(c)onsumerism. . . is correctly perceived as the most pressing threat to the traditional subject of university education in North America.”⁵⁰ The fact that assessments are given before the completion of courses inevitably leads to distortion. Moreover, it is dubious methodology to compare “student satisfaction” in different institutions through surveys of students experiencing only one institution. When, as in *The Best Universities of Asia*, languages and cultures are crossed, the procedure appears even less valid.

Few scholars reject the “consumer” model of a student altogether but many have serious reservations about its application. “The metaphor of students as customers does place students at the center of the educational process, where they belong. This advantage, however, is outweighed by the dissimilarities between commercial transactions and education. Placing education at the level of a commercial transactions compromises the goals of education ...”⁵¹ Another critic has written that both staff and students are essential components of a university while the “customers” are outsiders buying its services, such as governments, businesses and the general public.⁵² Philosophically, learning and consuming are not identical: “(H)ow can you teach students in the full sense of the term, when you regard them as consumers of a service?”⁵³

A consequence of the mismatch is shown by increasingly common practice of students to translate their rights as course consumers into demands for positive outcomes, and to seek legal remedies when they do not consider that they have achieved these, and sometimes even when they do. In a so-far unusual case, Dr James M. Houston, who earned his Ph.D. with distinction at Northern Arizona University in 1995, is reportedly suing the University in a State court for US\$1 million in punitive damages on the grounds that the education he received was so poor that he does not deserve the degree.⁵⁴ In Australia two former high school students sued an education authority for \$500,000 for ineffectual teaching.⁵⁵ An Australian university is reported to be currently facing action for breach of contract, breach of the Trade Practices Act and breach of the Fair Trading Act.⁵⁶

To what extent can academics be expected to resist the pressures to lower standards in the face of the student consumerism? Unfortunately there are many historical examples of individual academics failing to

live up to the ideals of academia: Ortega y Gasset wrote more than half a century ago of the “incredible abuses on the part of a few Professors.”⁵⁷ Grunberger noted that only two of eleven leading German medical academics walked out of a meeting where plans for the euthanasia of the mentally and physically ill were laid down.⁵⁸ Writing more recently of a crisis in standards, Bloom stated that “(t)he fault, of course, lies with the Professors.”⁵⁹ Readings observed that “few communities are more petty and vicious than University faculties,”⁶⁰ while the Japanese academic Miyoshi observed that instead of resisting the decline of universities, academics seem only too happy to become “frequent fliers and globe trotters.”⁶¹

A global university model is now promoted by governments, large corporations, the media, advertising agencies, some academics and even student organisations, in so far as they favour the consumer-rights aspect of the model but not the user-pays principle. This widely accepted model has increased access at the cost of reducing important parameters of acceptability. It has the side-effect of producing a degree of conformity destroying diversity and innovation, according to an OECD Report.⁶² Competition also induces conformity, as experimentation or diversification incurs market penalties. Marginson thus argues that “competition penalised horizontal diversity, pressing all institutions into a mould, so that universities competed on much the same set of activities.”⁶³

The ideals and realities of Australian universities: the current situation

In 1981 the then Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, told radio commentator John Laws: “I don’t think academics should have security of employment... I don’t think permanency is good for the institution or the individual.”⁶⁴ Successive ministries of Coalition, Labor and Coalition again have, with bipartisan support, steadily eroded the employment security of Australian academics and their teaching and research facilities. Is this process inevitable and does it depart fundamentally from the ideal of a university?

As already noted, Weber saw long-term appointment as a fundamental requirement of an effective university. The distinguished economist, Machlup, and other scholars agree.⁶⁵ Still called *tenure* in many countries, the National Tertiary Education Union of Australia

now prefers the more accurate phrase “continuity and security of employment.”⁶⁶ *Tenure* has been much criticised by the public at large but especially after being mischievously interpreted as comfort for life, regardless of performance or behaviour.⁶⁷ This seems an unjustifiable privilege incompatible with employment in an economically rationalist society. In addition to such philosophical objections, Australian academic managers and others see tenure as an artificial barrier to the flexibility required by universities to respond immediately to market trends.⁶⁸ Although the words *tenure* and *tenured position* are still used officially in Australia, tenure in the original form no longer exists. In 1988 academic employers and the union agreed to exchange a four per cent salary increase for the right to declare any academic redundant.⁶⁹ As already suggested by Weber and others, security of employment is necessary for long-term scholarship and the creation of high-grade courses, departments and universities. Academic insecurity also provides an opportunity for personal preference or favouritism in university personnel practices.⁷⁰ In response to this problem, the University of Sydney has approved a code of conduct and anti-corruption strategy that, *inter alia*, addresses the “manipulation of selection processes” in staff appointments.⁷¹

Access to universities is hindered by the progressive introduction of up-front and full-fees. In 1997 the Federal Government allowed universities to admit Australian students to courses as full-fee paying students without meeting normal entry requirements in the same way that overseas students have been admitted for some years. Monash University, one of the small number of universities to agree to the scheme, announced that “there will be no change to the quality of Monash’s outstanding student profile,”⁷² but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that ultimately more able students will lose their places to those less able but more affluent. The compromising of standards as a side-effect of easing entrance to increase funds in highly technical areas such as medicine or dentistry can only be seen as a threat to the ideal of a university, as happened for example in the Sydney Veterinary School (in Chapter 11).

In 1998, the *Report of a Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy* (The West Review)⁷³ was released. The Report was intended as a blueprint for future political control of higher education. It tackled the aims of higher education, the future operating environment, current arrangements for teaching and research and overall financing, in the light of enquiries in other countries and submissions

from interested parties and the public. The final document proved controversial, and if implemented, its proposals would hasten rather than retard the present movement of Australian universities towards, and possibly beyond, the limits of academic acceptability.

The Report does not directly discuss the fundamental question of “continuing employment” or “tenure,” which have no index entry. However, the chair’s mild foreword, stated that “(p)erhaps extended tenure will be too much of a luxury in the modern university”⁷⁴ and flexibility, competition and other characteristics of corporate behaviour is underscored throughout the Report. This is in line with the Green Paper of Education Minister John Dawkins in 1987. The major thrust of the West Report is the conception of higher education as an “industry,” thoroughly intermeshed with all other aspects of the modern Australian economy.⁷⁵ Funding should follow student preferences, as it follows consumer preferences in other industries, and students “should have a real say in what universities provide. The best way to achieve this is to ensure that public funding for tuition is driven by students’ choices.”⁷⁶

The conclusion is reached that the market place for higher education so created should be deregulated with regard to student fees. The outcome of this recommendation would be a much higher level of corporatisation of Australia’s universities. Direct political control would be less of a problem, as the state would have transferred its responsibility to market forces. The impact of control by market forces is, as Saul has identified, a crisis of conformity.⁷⁷ Corporatised universities simply cannot afford to experiment, maintain uneconomic courses, or allow their employees to act as social critics. Wilshire diagnosed the identical problem in the USA when he wrote of the “moral collapse of the university.”⁷⁸

The past role of Australian universities in providing intellectual and moral leadership in the community is a solid record of achievement. Academics have been prominent on both sides in the public debates over participation in war, capital punishment, and issues of ideology, and in more recent times, multiculturalism, Hansonism, the environment, the Mabo and Wik decisions, and the Constitution. However, with regard to curriculum, governments have exerted great pressure to rationalise courses, producing a considerable public outcry. In 1997 there was media speculation about the viability of some smaller universities such as the University of Ballarat to the point of anticipating closure. However, so far there have been no closures except by

amalgamation. But far worse, since the Howard Coalition Government came to power, 3,000 Australian academic positions have disappeared.⁷⁹

Concerning the last ideal, are Australian universities safe from violence? Since the confrontation of the anti-Vietnam period, Australian universities have avoided major violence but there is a growing problem of student suicide. In Queensland during the 1990s to date, more than 50 tertiary education students have deliberately killed themselves. The psychologist whose study revealed this believes that, while stress may be a fundamental element, there is evidence that young people experience higher rates of major depression than previous generations.⁸⁰ It is not unreasonable to speculate that depression among students may be related to the new depersonalised organisational form of universities where young people are seen as a source of income and not as a human resource worthy of investment.

Conclusion

We have considered some of the infamous examples of universities and their members driven to and far beyond the limits of academic acceptability. This occurs when the pursuit of truth and the provision of intellectual and moral leadership free from the threat of physical violence is abandoned. It must be asked: is there a realistic higher education policy that can maintain universities within the parameters of acceptability (assuming that the West Report has not provided a satisfactory answer)?

The German, and later naturalised Swiss, philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) is an appropriate authority. The Nazi regime officially rejected his status as a celebrated philosopher; in 1937 it suspended him from his position at the University of Heidelberg, and then scheduled him for deportation to a death camp and only the arrival of Allied Forces saved him from certain extinction.

Jaspers argued that a university's existence depends on the state, providing pure, independent and unbiased research for the benefit of society. The university in addition functions as the "intellectual conscience of an era."⁸¹ The university serves both state and society. The prevailing spirit and the political institutions of the latter, however, underpin a university. State interference can promote a

particular ideology or, in the worst cases, outright violence.⁸² Jaspers was concerned that the university should not yield to outside pressure to increase student numbers or to lower academic standards.⁸³ He saw the individual academic not as a public servant, following regulations, but as a person responsible for “his [sic] own research activity all the way from the initial problem he poses himself without any outside interference.”⁸⁴ Moreover, academic freedom should exist not only in research but in teaching. Jaspers was well aware of the failure of many academics to pursue the highest of ideals, particularly in demoralising circumstances.

When approached with contempt, treated with disrespect, manoeuvred into situations which virtually impose unethical conduct, and exposed to academic politics in the most literal sense, professors, like the rest of mankind, will eventually respond in conformity with the worst expectations.⁸⁵

But Jaspers was realistic about survival under a criminal regime where the university had “no choice but to keep alive its ideal in secret,”⁸⁶ and to await the fall of an evil regime. Even so, Jaspers was forced to conclude that a university can be “lost” if official hostility to its ideal persists over a long period of time.

These insights gained under conditions of utter terror are powerful confirmation of the hypothesis that if the minimal acceptable levels of basic academic ideals are not met, then severely harmful consequences will follow. The appropriate higher education policy is therefore one that safeguards these critical minima. Evidence of the harmful consequences of failing to meet them is provided by the tribulations of Orr, Rindos, Carrin, Parkes and others, plus loss of academic standards, political interference, bullying of staff, overwork and the failure of the universities to give intellectual leadership to the community, and in the ultimate irony, value for money.

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