

Chapter 12

Corporatised universities: an educational and cultural disaster

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Where from here?

Australian universities have been heavily criticised in these pages, and some specific examples of where things have gone wrong have been reported in detail. Not everyone sees these events negatively, however. Professor Don Aitken, until recently Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra, said:

I remain optimistic about the future of higher education in Australia. ... To regard what is happening to universities in Australia as simply the work of misguided politicians or managers is abysmally parochial.¹

Are the authors in this book concentrating too much on the damage that has been done? Is a greater good emerging that we have missed so far? As was pointed out in the Preface, globalisation is upon us; it is less than helpful to command, Canute-like, the tide to retreat. Rather the wise thing would be to acknowledge what we cannot change, and focus on what we can change. At the least, we need a resolution that is more academically acceptable than the one we have.

The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, Professor Stuart Sutherland, in commenting on parallel changes in Britain, put it this way:

The most critical task for universities is to recreate a sense of our own worth by refashioning our understanding of our identity — our understanding of what the word “university” means. ...The trouble is that in the process of expansion and diversification, the place that universities had at the table has not simply been redefined; it has been lost.²

Australian universities too have lost their place at the table. How can the functions of universities — to carry out untrammelled research in areas that may not be commercially profitable, to teach the outcomes of that research, and to act as informed social critic — be preserved and enhanced in an economic and political environment that is both increasingly global, *and* increasingly market-oriented, in its purview? Globalisation, a much-misused word, is not the problem. Universities have always been globally oriented; human knowledge is not restricted to national boundaries. Publication, conferences, visiting scholars, study leave, have long been instruments attesting to the international nature of universities. It is only when knowledge began to be treated as a marketable commodity that the place at the table was lost, and the universities’ troubles began.

Only days before Sutherland said the above, Professor David Pennington, previously Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne, said:

If we fail to understand what is happening in our society, we are at risk of losing vital support for higher education *and will leave the Government with a mandate for more radical intervention.*³

Pennington thought that “collegial decision-making processes” should be the means for working out ways of coping. Even as he was saying that, however, those processes were being dismantled, if they hadn’t been already, and today in most universities they simply don’t exist. In the five years since these statements by Sutherland and Pennington, the Government has radically intervened, and today, universities are in a much worse state than they were then.

In this chapter, then, we need to assess the damage, and to ask where we might go from here. What has actually happened to our university system? Is it simply that universities have been grossly under-funded, the corollary being that massive injections of funding would see matters right again? Or has something more fundamental happened in the last decade or so, which requires the sort of reflective review that Sutherland was talking about?

Universities in crisis?

This book was ready for publication when the majority and minority reports of the Senate Inquiry into higher education were released on 27th September, 2001.⁴ Many of the issues addressed in those reports have a direct bearing on the contents of this and several previous chapters; many of the examples and incidents reported in the majority report, *Universities in Crisis (UIC)*, were the same or similar to those that had been written about here. It would therefore be appropriate to review the Senate Inquiry as it related to our own framework.

The Australian Senate referred the inquiry into higher education to the Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee on 12 October, 2000, to report in August the following year. There were four Liberal, three Labor, and two Democrats on the Committee, which was chaired by Senator Jacinta Collins (Labor). There were 364 written submissions and over 219 witnesses interviewed in 14 public hearings around Australia.

The terms of reference were broad, including adequacy of current funding arrangements with respect to serving community demand, the differential effects if any of private and public funding, the quality of teaching and research, institutional autonomy, and a raft of issues to do with equal opportunity, public liability, contribution to economic growth, and so on.

Funding issues were at the core of the terms of reference, and given that there are deeply held philosophical issues on funding, it is not surprising that the Committee could not reach agreement, with the result that there was a majority report and two minority reports, along party lines. What does stretch belief is that all members had presumably read the same submissions, and heard the same witnesses, and yet the majority report, *UIC*, and the Liberal minority report (LMIN) are diametrically opposed on virtually all points, except for the proposal for a Universities Ombudsman! For example:

UIC: It is the Committee's view that what is revealed in evidence constitutes unmistakable deterioration in quality of standards, as measured by unambiguous quantitative data.

LMIN: The Opposition report suggests that the quality of teaching in our universities is declining. This conclusion is based on the unquestioning acceptance of complaints from student unions and some

academics. ... What is missing from the record of submissions is evidence from the vast numbers of apparently satisfied graduates in the workforce or from most of their employers.

UIC: The situation appears to be similar across highly popular areas like law, to areas of relative decline like sciences and languages. The effects are noted by both undergraduates and post-graduate students, and by academic staff. The Committee found strong evidence to demonstrate that many subject disciplines in many universities had experienced declining standards in recent years.

LMIN: The report suggests that because staff-student ratios have decreased and class sizes increased, and there has been an increasing use of casual staff, quality must have deteriorated. However no evidence was provided to support that assertion. Indeed Government senators note that the report itself concedes that few witnesses were prepared to concede that quality has declined.

UIC: One survey report indicated that the intellectual standards required for degrees had declined over the past two decades. The reason for this is while pass and graduation rates have remained constant, the conditions of teaching and learning have deteriorated, with the unit resources being only about half of what they were in 1980. Some of the evidence is alarming. The Committee heard persuasive evidence from Professor Anthony Thomas, of Adelaide University, about the declining standards in physics. An independent review, it was told, would show that there has been an enormous decline in standards in many institutions. To reveal to physicists at MIT or Berkeley the content of an Australian undergraduate physics course would be to invite derision.

LMIN: The Committee heard from a large number of vice-chancellors and university managers during the course of its inquiry. While many of them discussed the challenges facing them, and all of them, as could be expected, argued the need for more funding, not one of them described their university as being in crisis. Not one of them considered that the standard of graduates that they were producing had declined. If no single university is in state of crisis and quality and standards have not declined at any one institution, how can the sector as a whole be in crisis?

UIC: It was agreed by many vice-chancellors that there was a crisis that was leading to lower standards, but its full effects were not yet felt

One Vice-Chancellor did agree the system was in crisis: the President of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC), Professor Ian Chubb, but as LMIN goes on to say:

... one of the roles of lobby groups such as the AVCC is to argue for more funding and dramatic statements are one way of attracting attention to an issue, particularly in the period leading up to an election.

It would be tedious to continue the “is — isn't — is so too” slanging match between *UIC* and LMIN, covering such issues as teaching quality, soft marking, the brain drain, funding, and so on. The essence of the Government reply was flat denial on almost all counts, whatever the evidence; the report was “cynically political” in an election year, and irresponsibly damaging to the international reputation of Australian universities; that 91 per cent of graduates were satisfied based on a postal questionnaire (with a 20 per cent return rate); and that funding was higher than it has ever been, rising from \$8 billion when the Howard Government took over, to \$9.5 billion in 2001. When it was conceded that there were some problems:

Ironically, most of these changes have occurred in response to changes recommended by the report of a review of university management processes that was undertaken under the auspices of the former Labor Government.

This is certainly true. The changes that are causing such damage were indeed set in place by Dawkins in 1989.

The Democrats' minority report agreed with the majority report *UIC* on all points, but felt that some did not go far enough, and that other issues needed highlighting. This report emphasised that the universities were indeed in crisis, some universities, particularly rural universities, had been driven beyond the brink and were terminally damaged, and that the problems were systemic. Policies need to recognise that university education is not a cost to the community but an investment; that the market forces philosophy needed winding back and the effects of private vs. public funding noted, and the role and responsibilities of the Commonwealth towards higher education need clarifying. Funds can and should be topped-up by university-sponsored “spin-off” companies, using marketable ideas springing from

university work. Selling intellectual products is however a very different thing from seeking outside funding for teaching and research. The Democrats are committed to winding back HECS.

The differences between the reports led *The Australian* to editorialise:

Labor and the Democrats used the inquiry to push their own policies and mount a case against commercialisation ... anti-commercialisation ideology permeates every page. ... Labor ignores that unis need freedom to raise more money from businesses and fee-paying students ... Government senators adopted an equally offensive approach. They even denied that unis were in crisis ...⁵

This is somewhat unfair. It was after all a Labor Government that started commercialisation. And now, after extensive inquiry, they, with some Democrat help, are saying that the evidence is now telling us loud and clear that it has gone too far and is not working. That sounds remarkably flexible and realistic. More ideological is *The Australian's* continuing insistence that commercialisation is “the most efficient option and the taxpayer cannot bear most of the burden much longer”⁶ — a burden that is nevertheless lighter than that in most other OECD countries, while education spending has dropped from 5 per cent to 4.5 per cent of GNP since 1995.

The report was discussed on Radio National's “Australia Talks Back” (October 2, 2001), on which Senator Tierney presented the Government view. He reiterated that the *UIC* was politically motivated, and based on unsubstantiated anecdote. Virtually all other speakers with experience in the system, as students or staff, took the opposite view. One wonders how many times different people have to tell much the same story before it becomes credible, if not “substantiated.” One academic said that he was required to mark 350 examination papers in five days, and when he complained this was not possible, his dean told him: “You must know your students: give an estimate, based on their term's work.” When finally he submitted his grades, he was asked to remark all failed international students, but not to waste his time on failed HECS students. Either this caller was telling the truth or he was lying, as were the numerous other callers with their similar stories, not to mention the submissions and witnesses to the Inquiry itself.

The divide in the talk-back session was clear: the users at the coalface, staff and students, on the one hand, and Government senators on the other. The Government senators dismissed claims that soft marking was widespread:

The implication is that soft-marking is a product of reliance on fee-paying students, particularly foreign students. This ignores the fact that for universities in the marketplace, their reputations are a vital asset. Degrees awarded on the basis of dishonest practices would come to be regarded as useless.

This is tantamount to saying that no businesses would indulge in sharp practices because that would sully their reputations, and they would lose custom. Unfortunately, some businesses actually do engage in dishonest practices. The truth, in other words, resides in what is the case, not in hypothesising about what people might or might not do. In short, whether you accept the majority report, or the Government minority report, is a matter of the plausibility of the source, and of the evidence.

Methodologists in the social sciences talk of “triangulating” data; that is, if quantitative data such as figures on funding, or staff-student ratios, on the one hand, and qualitative data from different sources, such as teachers’ reports of pressures to cut corners in teaching and assessment, or students’ perceptions of inadequate teaching and assessing environments on the other, all point in the same direction, then you have a case to answer.

Here, the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, academic unions, and students, all agree that “the report backed almost every claim they had made about problems in higher education.”⁷ The case made in *Universities in Crisis* is virtually identical to the case we had assembled independently, in this book. So, when the submissions are read, and the trends pieced together, no reasonable person could deny that *UIC* has made a strong case that our universities are indeed in crisis. The only people to deny that this are those with a vested interest in denying it.

The three reports represent three distinct positions.

1. Universities are not under-funded, and current problems are due to growing pains.

This is the Government's position. Senator Tierney claims the more private funding, the less the drain on the public purse, and that is to the desired way to go. If an expanding system needs more money, then the more money that comes from private sources, the better.

2. Universities are under-funded, and this has created a crisis situation.

This represents much of the majority report, *UIC*. This, like (1), is essentially a quantitative view: with less money and more students, classes become unmanageably large, morale drops, the staff profile changes, and so on. Historically, it is argued that by the 1980s, universities were inefficient and wasting public money. Academics had become complacent, and universities contained a lot of dead wood. The system needed cleaning up. Dawkins started out with this as his rationale; budgets were tightened, and institutions and the people in them made more accountable, and if they could get nongovernmental funding, so much the better. Generally, however, universities were essentially on track, they just needed to be leaner and meaner. However, that process went too far and now universities need massive injections of funds.

3. Under-funding universities from the public purse corrupts them.

This is the essence of the Democrats' minority report, although it is present (but hardly "permeating every page" as *The Australian* puts it) in *UIC*. Funding from private sources for basic teaching and research imposes a different value system, that of economic rationalism, so that universities become different places, with different functions, many of which actually undermine academic functions. This is the nature of the crisis, not under-funding *per se*. Private funding has its uses, but not for the basic running of the universities.

The redefinition of universities

To return to the opening of this chapter, what has happened is that universities have been redefined, as they need to be according to Sutherland and Pennington, but the redefining has been done for them, by politicians with quite another, non-academic, agenda. I do not believe that to say this is being “abysmally parochial” as Don Aitken puts it, as I hope the following makes clear. The following material supplements *UIC*, except where *UIC* is directly quoted.

Under-funding and falling standards

Let us first look quickly at the question of whether or not universities are under-funded. The Federal Minister for Education, David Kemp, disagrees that universities are under-funded, even from public sources:

Over the past decade, total operating resources provided by the Australian Government for higher education (in constant prices and including capital funding) have increased significantly, from A\$4 billion in 1989 to \$5.2 billion in 1999, an increase of 30 per cent.⁸

This is true. The Government *is* paying more for higher education now than ever before. But so it should, as the size of the higher education sector itself is vastly greater than ever before. As Peter Karmel points out, student numbers increased in the period 1988 to 1996 by 49 per cent, while staff increased by only 26 per cent.⁹ Karmel sees that as

an increase in productivity of 18.5 per cent, assuming, of course, that the quality of services offered did not decline. Some decline in quality seems to have been likely ...¹⁰

UIC saw the decline as more than likely:

The Committee was faced with the irrefutable evidence of larger class sizes, overworked academic staff and abbreviated or rationalised or ‘modularised’ curricula. It is reasonable to assume that some diminution of standards must result.

It is hard to see that productivity has increased if quality has decreased.

Chapter 5 of *UIC* has a great deal of material on how this decrease in quality of teaching and learning took place. It is not only a matter of too many students for too few teachers. The staffing *profile* has changed. There are now considerably more part-time staff than there were: from 1990 to 1999, the proportion of casual academics, mostly young, double, from 7 to 15 per cent.¹¹ The ranks of experienced senior academics are seriously depleted. Many have migrated to greener pastures, while others have taken attractive redundancy packages and then gone into the private sector.¹² Those leaving tend to be those with a great deal to offer. Either they can sell their creative wares elsewhere, or they simply retire to get on with their own writing. Those who cannot sell their wares, or who have nothing to write about, will be the ones who will stay on as long as they can, now that compulsory retirement at a given age is seen as discriminatory and illegal in most States. The system will therefore tend increasingly to become top heavy with ageing mediocrities, and the newly employed to be inexperienced and insecure part-time and short-term contract staff.

Recent figures from the Department Education, Training, and Youth Affairs indicate that 54 per cent of full-time academic staff are over 45 years of age; in 1980, the figure was 30 per cent. On the other hand, while 60 per cent of PhD students wanted to become academics, 70 per cent were pessimistic about their being able to secure positions, and were seeking employment overseas or in non-academic areas. As a result, an acute shortage of academic staff is expected within five years.¹³

A survey by the member groups of the Australian Council of Professions,¹⁴ which included accountancy, architecture, dentistry, physiotherapy, and veterinary science, reported that it was no longer possible to maintain standards and keep within budget. The consequences:

- cuts in face-to-face teaching hours therefore insufficient coverage of essential material
- teachers and researchers attracted overseas
- clinical tutors in dentistry unpaid, and doing their job out of goodwill
- six day working weeks and 12-hours days
- cuts in library personnel and books

- staff:student ratios decreased
- salary increases to come from existing budgets, which meant they were either unpaid or financed by further staff cuts.

The overall impact on staff morale is indicated in a survey by Gillespie and Walsh¹⁵: occupational stress amongst academics has increased to unprecedented levels, causing personal and professional problems. The precipitating factors: insufficient funding and resources, work overload, poor management practices, insufficient recognition and reward, and job insecurity.

One way of looking at the question of declining standards is to look at international figures on research productivity and recognition. While ANU (which has special status as a dedicated research university) is up with Harvard, MIT, Stanford and the Sorbonne, other Australian universities are slipping, when compared to Asian universities.¹⁶ That was in 1998. Two years later, ANU comes 16th, the University of Melbourne 64th, and UNSW 85th, and that's it. By way of comparison, two universities in Hong Kong, a small territory with just over a third of Australia's population, come in at 36th and 37th (The University of Hong Kong, and The Chinese University of Hong Kong).¹⁷ Hong Kong universities are well funded from the public coffers, research money is plentiful, while the staff-student ratio is 12.1, compared to Australia's overall 19.1. Yet Australian universities are falling over each other trying to woo Hong Kong students, when they can get a better education in most areas in their own universities.¹⁸

In short, there can be no doubt that Australia's university system is in deep trouble, and that a major reason is inadequate funding, whether public or private. The crash diet for health reasons has gone much too far; the sector is anorexic and needs treatment.

Unfortunately, it is not this simple.

The imposition of economic rationalism

While it is unquestionable that universities have been grossly underfunded, money is no longer the central issue. The real problem is that universities have been radically redefined along economic rationalist lines, and are no longer dedicated to academic ends. The argument goes like this:

1. A university education is a private benefit for the individual concerned, and should therefore be paid for by the recipient.
2. Universities produce outcomes, in both teaching and research, that are saleable and that therefore are subject to market forces.
3. Market forces automatically control for quality.

The strategy therefore, which the Coalition Government has been adopting for the past five years, is deliberately to under-fund universities so that they are forced to obtain money elsewhere than from the public purse. If they are any good they will get it, and if what they are offering is not good enough, they will not. In other words, universities have been redefined, from institutions that are fundamental to a civilised society, to shops that sell a self-indulgent commodity.

A spokesman for the economic rationalist position is Russell Blackford, former executive director of the Australian Higher Educational Industrial Association (AHEIA — the vice-chancellors' union), who freely admits that universities are currently having difficulties:

dedicated academics are often under a degree of strain that must damage the contributions they can make. Something valuable gets lost when they carry high teaching workloads, attempt to satisfy endless bureaucratic requirements (ultimately imposed by governments); try to care for individual students; and look with increasing desperation for those pockets of time to devote to scholarly reflection.¹⁹

But then comes the sting, based on a common, but nonetheless entirely unexamined, assumption:

adequate funding to lift Australia's universities to higher ranks in the world pecking order can probably never be cajoled out of federal or state revenue. Since this funding cannot come from government sources, universities must increasingly make alliances with the world of business and behave more like business themselves.²⁰

Like it or not, he says, corporatisation is the only way for universities to go. Like all economic rationalists, he echoes Margaret Thatcher's TINA: There Is No Alternative. Lachlan Chipman, another economic rationalist occupying a senior academic administrator's

role, likewise argues that universities should no longer rely on the public purse:

The total public cost of higher education cannot represent a significantly greater share of the national budget than it does at present.²¹

Is “at present” before the Howard Government slashed the tertiary budget by \$2 billion, or after? Don’t government priorities determine how the budget is shared “at present”?

The only attempt to explain just *why* universities won’t get more funding from taxpayers, from either political party, was given by a former senior adviser to Education Minister David Kemp.²² The argument was straight numbers. Within the education sector, there are five times the number of people involved in nonuniversity level education than at university; social security recipients outnumber students and staff by seven to one. The priorities are determined by the numbers — “so get over it,” as the writer enjoined the universities! Societal importance, what the function of universities should be, the responsibilities of government, are ignored by economic rationalists, or sneered at as unrealistic, idealistic, anachronistic, left-wing, or whatever other pejorative term comes to mind.

Those with other than quantitative priorities, or those who think there might indeed be alternatives, had better shut up about it:

If an employee cannot stomach (the employer’s lawful plans), the honourable thing may well be resignation rather than using a tenured position as a kind of bunker from which to wage a propaganda war.²³

In Blackford’s view academic freedom is not at issue. Academics who think they may as of right criticise their administration’s procedures or plans have themselves got the notion of academic freedom wrong. They see academic freedom as the

supposed freedom or right to slander colleagues, rubbish them in internal debate or to make public attacks on the institution that after all pays the food bill.²⁴

Academic freedom, the right to argue an opposing case, can be a terrible nuisance to a manager holding the economic rationalist world view. Anyone who disagrees with that view is either obtuse, or ill-intentioned. They must toe the line, or suffer the consequences.

Two cultures

People holding this one-dimensional world-view do not see that, in a dedicated academic institution, the administrative task is to serve academic goals, not to force academics to serve administrative or commercial goals.

UIC refers to the research of McInnis,²⁵ who speaks of a clash of cultures in universities: the managerial culture and the academic culture. Each group perceives its relationship with the university in a different way. Morale, he found, was noticeably higher among administrators than among academics, which is not surprising, if the academic culture has been beaten into the ground by administrators.

Approaches best suited to serving commercial or managerialist goals are incompatible with those suited to serving academic goals. The academic *modus operandi* requires that hasty conclusions be avoided, that evidence be patiently sifted and judgement withheld, that counter instances are to be sought and the ambiguity they generate to be welcomed, that what has already been concluded may be reconceptualised and restructured on further compelling evidence. There is an obligation to publish, and the acceptability of the contribution is not based on its convenience for the powers-that-be, but whether or not it was conducted according to the canons of scholarship. Unfortunately, all this is a terrible way to conduct politics.

Politicians and administrators want to deal in certainties; they aim to mould events not to study them. Withholding judgement is seen as uncertainty, weakness. The counter-instance is not to be celebrated but suppressed, exactly as Thatcher's TINA flatly declares. You don't want other alternatives explored, or your decisions held up by lengthy debate. To make maximum thrust, you quote only the evidence that supports your position. You get your way top-down, placing under you only those who are likely to help you to get your way, and you reward them for so doing. That way of operating makes perfect political sense, but it creates an environment that is totally uncongenial to teaching and research. This is precisely why Menzies saw fit to implement the Murray Report. We need both worlds, each in its proper place.

These two quite different ways of operating attract different kinds of people. Until recently, academics have been allowed, if at times grudgingly, to go about their business in the way they thought best. No longer. Instead of academics deciding, on the basis of their

expertise, what research should be done to advance the field, what the state of knowledge is and how it is best organised into curricula, the managerialist mind is defining the boundaries of research and teaching, telling academics what research is going to pay off best, and what courses will attract most students.

And if there are any objections, there is the door.

The consequences of private funding on research

The crux of the argument against private funding is that there comes a stage when the tail begins to wag the dog. Nobody is arguing that all costs should be borne by the public sector. While this used to be the case in the United Kingdom, where the public purse paid not only fees but living costs of all students as well, this is not possible today, with over 40 per cent of the age group at university. However, when academic principles are compromised, such as freedom to conduct research or to publish findings, or when students paying higher fees are given preferential treatment in assessment, the system has gone wrong.

Let us take research first. Research is affected in two ways by private funding. First, there is damage-by-neglect; second, damage-by-corruption.

UIC in Chapter 6 focuses more on damage-by-neglect. This occurs because public and private funding support different things. Private funding in this country is almost always directed towards supporting particular projects, unlike the US where many universities receive bequests and no-strings donations, which can be used across the institution. Research of all kinds requires a very expensive infrastructure, such as libraries, trained staff, support staff not specific to a project, laboratories and equipment, and so on, which are supported by public, not private, funding. If, therefore, public funding is decreased, the infrastructure suffers. At some point, ill-maintained equipment will need to be replaced. The money to do that must come from the public sector. The Senate Committee heard many examples of this kind of damage-by-neglect, with many libraries, for instance, carrying less than half the number of serials, essential for academics to be kept up to date in their areas, than they used to carry ten years ago. There comes a point when even private funding is compromised.

What company would want their research carried out on outdated and less than maximally effective equipment?

An even more important infrastructure is conceptual. That is, commercial or developmental work requires the conceptual knowledge base provided by fundamental research into non-commercial subjects; *UIC* refers to this as “discovery” research, which is interest-driven, and the outcome of which is unpredictable. Money to fund this kind of research is less than half what it was 20 years ago.²⁶ Even much public research money does not support discovery research, because the Government prefers to steer research towards national priorities and directions that the Government has set, not the researcher. Many politicians, the corporate sector, and some academic managers, do not appear to understand that commercialised research is dependent on fundamental research.

Damage-by-corruption occurs because private funding is inevitably in the private interest. The research not only has to be what the corporation wants done, but the applicants for funds have to convince the donor that the desired outcomes are highly probable: that in other words the research will be a good investment.

However, when funding is provided only when assurances are given that the research is likely to yield the desired outcomes, one might ask what kind of activity is being funded. Research is designed to see what *might* be there, not to confirm what someone would *like* to see there. Any proviso as to outcomes distorts the research, and obviously increases the likelihood of cooking the data. Academic fraud certainly existed when only fame was the spur, but when finance is contingent on a promise to yield the wanted results, the probability of fraud must increase manifold.

Another example where academic values are compromised is on the matter of freedom to publish, an issue that was given a good airing in *UIC*. Donors want to protect their investment. Accordingly, recipients of private research funds are often required to sign confidentiality documents, undertaking not to publish or even to discuss their work outside the confines of the project itself. Universities exist to construct and to publicise knowledge, yet some are now conniving at the privatisation of knowledge. La Trobe University and the University of Melbourne have issued directives prohibiting research and publication in areas that might compete with donor research.

An academic researcher’s career is based on international recognition by peers, which is obtained by publishing in peer-reviewed and

respected journals, and through conference presentations. Confidentiality clauses prevent academics from using these channels to achieve recognition until the project has finished and any patents lodged. Thus, an individual researcher's curriculum vitae will be years out of date, putting that individual at a disadvantage when making job applications. An even less savoury aspect of this is "team" authorship, where intellectual products — ideas and ensuing research — become the property of the institution or the donor, and where names other than that of the originator of the work are attached to the product, which seemed to be the issue in the Carrin affair (see Chapter 10).

However, it is not only academic staff who suffer. The case of Alexandra de Blas, not reported in UIC, would provide a revealing close to this section.²⁷ Ms. de Blas was a student in Environmental Studies at the University of Tasmania. In 1992, she obtained First Class Honours for a thesis entitled "The Environmental Impact of the Operations of the Mt Lyell Mining and Railway Company on Macquarie Harbour and the Community of Strahan." She argued that the Company had had detrimental effects on Macquarie Harbour, such that heavy metal contamination had raised the mercury levels of most fish in the area to a significantly higher level than the recommendations of the National Health and Medical Research Council. The thesis was scheduled for publication as a working paper by the University of Tasmania Centre for Environmental Studies in early 1993.²⁸

When ABC News referred to Ms de Blas' conclusions, she received, on 5 February 1993, a letter from the Mt Lyell Company. The Company was unhappy about the "defamatory imputations" in her "scientifically flawed" work, and insisted that no one but her examiners be allowed to see it, on pain of legal action. Her work was to be withdrawn from any library where it could be viewed by members of the public. The Head of the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies received a similar communication.²⁹ Ms de Blas, her supervisor, and representatives of the Mt Lyell Company met two weeks later, but despite apparent progress, the Company subsequently presented a further list of criticisms, and a letter from its solicitor. Ms de Blas was forced to engage her own solicitor and plans for immediate publication of her thesis were shelved. The ABC 7.30 Report took up the issue on 5 April and the Mt Lyell Company backtracked to the extent of agreeing to respond to a published paper.

The Hobart *Mercury* published a detailed account of the affair, revealing that the University Research Office had offered publication

with the University's protection on condition that she signed over the intellectual copyright to the University, allowing it to make changes, and to decide whether to publish at all. Dissatisfied, Ms de Blas considered an option from the University of Technology, Sydney, and was told by authorities at the University of Tasmania to include a disclaimer stating that no member of the University of Tasmania supported her opinions.

The case was widely discussed in Tasmania, and finally the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Gilbert (now at Melbourne University), agreed to drop the disclaimer, and to allow her to publish with the University as originally planned. Ms de Blas, however, considered that the concession came too late. "I thought academic freedom was a fundamental principle of universities and I didn't think that this sort of thing could happen."³⁰ Her thesis was published in May 1994 by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney. The University of Tasmania was not involved.

The incident drew much adverse criticism. Michael Field, a former Premier, found it frightening that the University, which should be "the bastion of intellectual independence," had been intimidated so easily. Dr Gerry Bates, a Green MP and former senior lecturer in Law, considered that the University's willingness "to hold back the presentation of knowledge because of threats of embarrassment to influential vested interests" came close to intellectual suppression.³¹ An editorial in the *Sunday Tasmanian* insisted that "Ms de Blas' voice should be heard."³² The Green periodical, *The Daily Planet*, considered the action against Ms de Blas's thesis "a prime example of the pressure that can be applied by vested interests."³³

The nub of the matter was that the first reaction at the University of Tasmania, which had awarded a thesis the highest honour for its brilliance, was to run for cover when challenged by powerful outside interests. Although in this instance academic values prevailed, it could easily have been otherwise. Meantime, people and institutional reputations suffered. This is a very clear example of how corporate interests, who were not in this instance sponsoring the research, will react in a climate where Government funding cuts deliberately throw academia into the hands of private enterprise.

The consequences of private funding on teaching

Teaching has likewise been degraded by the effects of corporatisation. Australian students, either through HECS or direct payment of fees, now cover about 40 per cent of operating costs, which across the world is a relatively high proportion for students attending publicly supported institutions.³⁴ The ramifications of this notion of student-as-customer profoundly affect all aspects of teaching.

What is taught

Perhaps the most obvious effect, noted in *UIC*, is that vocational courses, the demand and staffing for which are market driven, are displacing the fundamental disciplines. Classics, history, some languages, and even mathematics and physics, are in jeopardy in many institutions. While Blackford³⁵ asserts that vocational subjects subsidise the pure subjects, the evidence is entirely to the contrary. In 1998, for example, Monash University announced that 55 teaching positions in the Faculty of Arts were to be cut, on top of already heavy cuts over the previous five years, while the Department of Classics and the Centre for American Studies were to be closed entirely,³⁶ never mind that, as Peter Karmel says

... philosophy, classics, modern languages, linguistics, physics and mathematics are the very foundations on which important applied research is based. If we lose strength in these, much of what all universities stand for will crumble.³⁷

A related effect is that the structure of what is taught is destroyed. Marketability requires that degree structures be modularised. That is, instead of comprising a major subject or subjects studied in increasing depth from first to third years, they are being restructured into semester length self-contained modules, many of which have no prerequisites, and are interchangeable across academic years. This makes it possible to establish a currency in course credits and transferability across institutions, which in turn makes courses easier to sell. At the University of Newcastle, new courses are now not normally allowed to have prerequisites, precisely so that they can plug in to any degree, anywhere. A university degree can thus comprise 24 first year modules in effect, and while a particular package might be given a

sexy title like “Humanistic and environmental studies,” the fact is that such a degree mostly comprises smatterings of knowledge along a broad front. It seems not to be realised that expertise comes only when students go progressively deeper into a subject. It is only then that they can they develop the higher order concepts and problem solving strategies needed for operating at the level required of a professional. Yet:

the restructuring of courses in response to student demands for flexibility has often resulted in a ‘smorgasbord’ approach to course offerings that provides inadequate scope for structured learning and intellectual development.³⁸

However, it is not student demands for flexibility, so much as market demands for saleability, that is causing this damaging restructuring. The notion that at university one can study a major subject in increasing depth is fast becoming a quaint folly of the past.

Modular teaching also means that academics who are expert in some aspect of their discipline do not teach to the level of their expertise, and so undergraduate students do not experience the most important value of the lecture method, that of being directly exposed to the thinking of an expert:

The *unique* contribution of the lecture thus derives from the nexus between research and teaching ... Heaven forbid that teachers have reached the demeaning point where all that remains is to tell students content that they can read more effectively.³⁹

Teaching demands and staff development

The inclusion in university course offerings of the kind of material that would have previously been taught in vocational colleges and the TAFE sector has meant that the student population is much more diverse than it once was. Increased access has meant that students are in terms of academic commitment, age, academic ability, and background, quite different from those university academics have been used to teaching. That is no bad thing — student diversity can itself be a rich and rewarding experience for both teachers and students — but it is an immense teaching challenge. Teachers need help in coping with it.

Some universities have staff development centres that are intended to help teachers with these problems, but they are seriously understaffed, and in a corporate climate have the overwhelming disadvantage that they do not attract student fees. They are funded grudgingly, and although they are the key to meeting the current grim look-out for teaching and learning, many existing units have been downsized, often to be merged with educational technology units, as if IT is the answer (it is not: see later). The University of NSW ruthlessly disembowelled its once highly effective Professional Development Centre in such a “rationalisation” measure. In England, on the other hand, as *UIC* points out, when the same process of corporatisation was being imposed, a large tranche of university funding was set aside for the improvement of teaching: £89 million annually, much of which was spent on establishing new and strengthening existing professional development centres, and funding research into teaching. The Australian *pro rata* equivalent is \$90 million; the Australian Government allowed \$1 million. Awards to individual outstanding teachers are no answer, as *UIC* also seems to think, because they reinforce the notion to the less than outstanding that excellent teaching is for the gifted few, not for the likes of them. But it is the less than outstanding who need the help.

Classes not only contain a much more diverse range of student, they are becoming larger and larger. Teachers and students treasure most face-to-face encounters, when the personal chemistry may happen that inspires students to make life-changing decisions. Such opportunities are heavily diluted in huge classes. Most first year students today would be very lucky indeed to have a significant, potentially life-changing, face-to-face conversation with an academic.

Large classes force lecturers into using the most inefficient methods of teaching and assessing: non-interactive lecturing, and assessing by final examination using multiple-choice or some other quick-but-limited method of assessment. Yet the Dawkins *Green Paper* demanded the elimination of smaller classes; they are “a poor use of resources.”⁴⁰ Across Australia and New Zealand, there were bitter complaints that increasing lack of financial resources forced academics to handle huge classes of angry and dissatisfied students. Full fee-paying students were relied on as the financial saviours of the higher education system, at the very time when tertiary conditions were least likely to attract them, and when staff development facilities that might remedy the situation were being down-sized. Unless

handled by expert teachers, large classes are unsatisfactory learning environments that alienate students, but because most teachers dislike teaching them, they are typically allocated to the most junior and inexperienced staff.

Assessment and grading

Learning is further impaired when multiple-choice (M-C) tests are used, where passing scores can be accumulated on the basis of sheer recognition, not even recall.⁴¹ Class size and long contact hours prevent teachers from assessing structured and extended student performances, and giving the kind of thoughtful feedback from which students learn most effectively, as Gwynn details in Chapter 11. The higher cognitive activities of critical analysis, application, and theorising, are simply not addressed, either in the teaching or in the assessment; and not being required of students, are that much less likely to occur.⁴² Yet the rhetoric in the aims and objectives of courses and programmes enthusiastically advertises the high quality learning outcomes that students may expect to achieve. It is possibly only a matter of time before students begin successfully suing universities for failing to deliver what they promise, as has happened already in other countries.⁴³

If education is a commodity to be bought and sold for profit, the whole question of grading becomes contentious. A student, paying for his/her education, either through HECS or full fees, will demand full value for their money. The university, for its part, needs the fees. Procedures are designed to make appeals for higher marks easier and more frequent, and there is little doubt that in many institutions, staff are pressured to reassess upwards failed full-fee paying students. Hence the issue of soft marking, which was one of the main stimuli for the Senate Inquiry, and which is explored in detail in *UIC*. An encouraging trend for the future is that

in all cases in which reported irregularities have occurred, and in which highly questionable practices contrary to quality assurance have been identified, it has been relatively junior academic staff who have stood firm in defence of academic values and in upholding quality standards and the integrity of the university. Those on the other side of the argument have been faculty or departmental heads or deans or higher.

A matter that *UIC* did not pursue is assessment strategy. The issue is how grades are determined: by matching student performances against preset standards, or by ranking students against each other. Employers must know whether a graduate has sufficient skill in a professional area to be worth hiring. The engineer's bridge must not collapse; the doctor must not harm healthy patients. The academics' task therefore is to show that the required standards have been met. But most universities don't require assessment against standards. Instead, teachers are required to "grade on the curve." That is, the grades of High Distinction, Distinction, Credit, etc., are awarded in pre-allotted proportions, roughly 10% to be HD (more HDs might imply slack standards); then 15% to 20% are awarded D; 30% C, 45% or so are given a P, and if there is the odd failure, it is not to be awarded to a full-fee-paying student.

Grading on the curve is used in the mistaken belief that it standardises results across subjects and across departments. Thus, all departments appear to be doing very well, each as good as the other, and no wild card teachers are being unduly tough or soft in their marking. Everything in the managerial garden is lovely. The procedure is however based on faulty assumptions,⁴⁴ and despite its popularity, does not do what the public wants and expects: *a certification that particular standards have been reached*. To "follow the curve," it is necessary only that the students are placed in rank order, for which purpose an M-C test will do, and then they are apportioned into the grading categories. Grading on the curve encourages sloppiness, requiring only that students can be rank ordered. The test or exam need not even address the curriculum. Many universities enforce this policy, although it cannot make a statement about standards reached. Perhaps that is why.

A startling example of how *not* to award grades is provided by the investigation of the NSW Deputy Ombudsman into a case at the University of Sydney.⁴⁵ *UIC* reports this case from the perspectives of harassment and university procedures for dealing with it, not from the point of view of assessing student performance. A student's postgraduate thesis was submitted late, and given a mark of 76. However, during an oral examination, in which the student left the room in tears, one examiner persuaded the other two examiners that because of "supervisory difficulties," the thesis be upgraded to 79, which meant a classification of Second Class Honours for the degree. The student then raised other issues, including sexual harassment, and

claimed her thesis was worthy of First Class Honours. An internal enquiry, headed by Pro Vice-Chancellor Napper, suggested 79 be converted to 80, which would make the degree now First Class Honours. He also requested that the memo detailing the matter be destroyed lest it be found under Freedom of Information and used against the University if further litigation took place.⁴⁶ The Deputy Ombudsman advised that her “real” mark should have been 73, when re-adjusted for lateness and the bonuses for stress.

But what is a “real” mark? Surely that which reflects the genuine worth of the work done. But here we have a thesis variously marked at 73, 76, 79 and 80, ranging from Second to First Class Honours. The variation is due not so much to differences in staff opinion as the intrinsic academic worth of the thesis, as to differences in opinion as to non-academic matters — lateness, stress, supervisory difficulties, and sexual harassment — and erroneously factoring in these in an arbitrary way. This is a perfect example where professional development in principles of assessment needs to be given to all concerned. The public — not to mention the student — has simply no idea whether the thesis demonstrates those qualities of flair and originality that are associated with First Class Honours, or of highly competent mastery that is associated with a good Second Class degree.

Teacher-student relations

Apart from the question of sheer numbers, corporatisation has brought a qualitative change in the relationship between teacher and student. The teacher is not so much a mentor and the student a mentee, the student is now a customer, expecting a service that has been paid for. We have seen the effects this has on grading. More generally, the way teachers and students perceive each other is different. A warm mentoring relationship — at best — has been changed to a commercial negotiation.

Thus, the nature of sexual harassment in the teacher-student context must also change. The traditional view, which was argued in the Orr case, was that the academic teacher-as-mentor has considerable power, and therefore a special responsibility for the welfare of his or her charge, acknowledging their greater vulnerability. Consensual relations between male staff and female students were therefore regarded as improper behaviour, and later redefined as harassment.⁴⁷

When the environment has been redefined from an academic one to a shop-floor where business is transacted, however, all that dissipates. Harassment in the work-place is now covered by work-place relations legislation, which cuts both ways. With the increasing pressure on students to achieve economically profitable qualifications, they may threaten staff with the time-consuming and humiliating appeals, or take the initiative in offering examiners sexual favours: “lays for A’s,” as Martyr puts it (Chapter 8). Students who force such a confrontation can exert considerable power, and disadvantage their less aggressive contemporaries.

The sexual aspect can be partially resolved, as Martyr suggests, by guidelines to prevent academics from grading their student lovers. In an environment where the participants are presumed to be adults engaged in a commercial transaction that would seem to be about as far as one can go. Is that enough? It is at any rate a far cry from the moral position-taking that the Orr Case attracted.

How students feel about our new university system is well summed by Ann Clark, a 22 year old student at the University of Sydney, writing for the Centenary of Federation edition of *The Australian*:

You walk around the campus these days and you can feel a cloud hanging over it. I think lecturers are really pressured to do much more work. Tutorials are being cut across the board. It seem ridiculous for classes like philosophy to have no tutorials. In my first year I did an art history course and we had to sit on the stairs or outside for lectures. It was hopelessly overcrowded. Courses can get cancelled all the time because there aren’t enough teaching staff. University administrations now seem to operate on the rhetoric of money. Their focus is on efficiency, output and productivity, which seem totally inimical to the values of education. It’s really a crude language, which doesn’t describe what it is to learn. ...⁴⁸

In sum, there can be absolutely no doubt that teaching standards have plummeted in the last ten years, and that the reason is not only because universities are now enrolling a poorer quality of student, as many conservative academics of the old school would claim. The reason is much more basic. The whole system has been undermined by nonacademic and anti-educational priorities. It is no longer working properly.

Managerialism in the raw

The restructuring of particular institutions may not initially have been seen by their senior administrators as subverting academic standards, but when managerialism began to take hold of the thinking of higher management, the slide was inevitable.

Vice-chancellors themselves, no longer the first amongst equals but chief executive officers with their own agenda, now knew real power and a few indulged it with enthusiasm. Funds were found for self-indulgent fancies: to hugely extend the vice-chancellorial quarters, to landscape an exotic garden for the exclusive delight of the vice-chancellorial eye, to indulge Caligula-like paroxysms of rage when the gardener leaves the sprinklers on at a time inconvenient for the vice-chancellorial perambulations, to lease suites, in sporting stadia, for the entertainment of the vice-chancellorial retinue.⁴⁹

South-East Asia is perceived as a plentiful source of full fee paying students, and no expense is spared to tap that rich lode. Hundreds of senior Australian academics go to South-East Asian countries to drum up full fee-paying students, to participate in off-shore flexible learning courses, even to hold one-on-one meetings as dissertation supervisors of external higher degree students. The University of NSW has permanent offices in Singapore, Bangkok, Jakarta and, most recently in probably the most expensive commercial real estate in the world, Hong Kong, where in fact all Australian universities retain agents. The cost-effectiveness of these “investments” must surely be questioned, when resources for teaching and research are so thin.

However, staff who do object to such extravagances are targeted. Professor Allan Patience, a staff representative on the Council of Victoria University, objected to the University’s leasing of a “corporate box” at the Docklands Stadium at a cost in excess of \$100,000 per annum, and conveyed his objections to colleagues by e-mail. The Vice-Chancellor objected to the “undergraduate tone” of the e-mail and cancelled Professor Patience’s access to this facility, essential now for most academics to do their job. He was threatened with an action for defamation.⁵⁰

The silence of the lambs

The Patience incident is recent. But how did it get to this? The rot started in the 1989, and few academics spoke up then. The whistle-blowers were few when they were needed. When those who did protest were immediately counter-attacked, and they were not well supported by their colleagues. There were many reasons for the silence of the academic lambs.

The Rindos case (Chapter 6) could be read as a textbook example of trying to terrorise an untenured academic into silence — only it didn't work in this particular case — and to sound a more general warning to all staff. The message was clear: If you criticise your superiors, you will find tenure or contract renewal that much more difficult to obtain. There is little or no defence against such punishments. Academics fear that the goal posts are moved to suit the case. If you are in administration's sights, you are going to be shot one way or the other. Concentrate on teaching, and you fail the research test; concentrate on research, and you fail the teaching test. True or not, the Rindos case makes it look that way.

Bessant speaks of the “climate of fear” that has developed, where middle management deliberately spreads rumours “to keep the troops on tenterhooks” (Chapter 4). This is only one chilling step down from Orr's feeling “approaching panic, the fear of being without the protection of the law” (Chapter 3). Academics on contract or on probation, even tenured researchers striving to find the truth about their segment of the world, can feel the fear of being without the protection of their own administrations. Research students, such as de Blas, and academics generally, now have all been warned. Don't expect that your research will be conducted in a framework of academic freedom. In fact, most academics no longer expect that it will: over 80 per cent of academics surveyed by the Australia Institute saw commercialisation of their university as leading to a decrease in academic freedom.⁵¹

Management can use the carrot just as effectively as the stick. There can be little doubt that many promotions within the new managerial universities were not been made on academic grounds, but on willingness to obey the vice-chancellor. Greed certainly operated in the higher echelons. An outstanding feature of the Dawkins reforms was the explosion of positions at higher and middle management, at the expense of lecturer and senior lecturer teaching levels. When

institutions were told to amalgamate, somebody's empire was going to expand drastically, and those who thought it would be theirs were unlikely to object too strenuously. The AVCC was least of all likely to protest at the Dawkins and later reforms, for which they were duly chastised in the press: "an appropriate collective noun for a group of vice-chancellors would be a 'pusillanimity'."⁵²

Another factor that might explain the reticence of some academics is the "good form" syndrome. It is not good form to criticise one's superiors. Let us briefly recall the scene in the Senate of the University of Newcastle (Chapter 9). Senate's representative on Council had twice refused to put Senate's view to Council, as he was expected to do — and Senate's reaction was to express confidence in him with acclamation. This is the politics of "good form." The Senate's representative was generally liked, whatever his role in the Dip. Ed. dispute. The Dean of Education had twice got the vote he wanted, and now he appeared to want blood. Not good form at all. So if academic priorities went with the Dean on the vote, the priorities of good form saw to it that he was put firmly in his place in what was represented as his criticisms of senior administrators. Enough was enough.

However, apart from extrinsic factors like fear, greed, and the politics of good form, there is an intrinsic reason why many academics shy away from taking up the political cudgels. It is a question of the two cultures. Most academics know they are political innocents, that they are not good at playing the political game. Thus, when Dawkins tabled his *Green Paper*, the lambs remained silent. With political skill, Dawkins had planted "flexible hierarchies," which required all posts beyond senior lecturer to be recontested after a set period, and that terrified the lambs no end.⁵³ So he gave them the *White Paper*, which was worse in all respects, except that the dreaded flexible hierarchies had been dropped. The lambs baaed a collective sigh of relief on finding that. But they had overlooked such matters as the loss of academic self-government, even of academic freedom itself. They too had been bought, in a currency they valued most, by someone more street-wise than they were.

Back at the academic freezing works, the lambs initially refused to believe they had been outsmarted. The Dawkins proposals were met with disbelief: appointed managers to replace election;⁵⁴ staff no longer to divide their time between teaching, research and administration;⁵⁵ dismissal for redundancy and financial exigency as well as for inadequate performance;⁵⁶ institutions to become more entrepreneur-

rial, with more applied research for industry, and funds to be obtained from full-fee-paying overseas students.⁵⁷ Universities, the woolly lambs then believed, simply could not be run in this way. Of course it wouldn't happen!

They were right: universities cannot be run in this fashion. But they were also wrong: it did happen. Any hopes that the Dawkins proposals would reform and improve universities were soon dashed by events. Managerialism did not create a more efficient use of time, freeing academics from administrative chores. On the contrary, the combination of centralised direction and demands for accountability created a bureaucratic nightmare of form-filling, especially by heads of department. Instead of collegial decisions by a representative professorial board, there were "retreats" where managers, with meagre academic qualifications themselves, harangued senior academics, now the subordinates in the new administrative system, about their obligations.

Coming to terms with the modern world

The above was in the recent past. Let us look now at the rapidly changing present. It is unarguable that universities must change as the world changes. But it does not follow that the changes required of universities are those that have been imposed by economic rationalists. That is the crux of the matter.

Of what sort of world change should universities be particularly mindful? One is certainly in educational philosophy, summed up in the phrase "life-long learning," which contains two important ideas. The first is that people should have the right and the opportunity to access learning that will enhance their careers and their quality of life. Whether universities are the places best designed for this function is the critical question, but it has not been seriously addressed in Australia; it has just been assumed so.

The second important idea is that the old "fill-up-the-tanks" model of education is inadequate. Traditional education worked on the assumption that in school and in the immediate post-secondary years, students can acquire the skills, values and information they would need for the rest of their lives. If that assumption was ever true, which is doubtful, it is quite untenable in contemporary post-industrial society. Knowledge is changing far too quickly for that to work.

This difficulty may be met if universities teach not the information itself, but the skills of knowing when, how and where to find out the needed information. This is the rationale of “problem-based learning” (PBL), originally developed in medical education, but now a preferred method in many areas of professional preparation. In essence, students learn how to seek the information relevant to solving problems as they need it, not to learn beforehand the information they may or may not need in the distant future.

PBL is not, however, as widely used as many teachers would like. PBL requires intensive initial curriculum development, so when resources are cut to the bone, and where staff have 14-15 contact hours a week already, PBL or any innovation is seen as an impossible pipe-dream. This is another area where corporatisation is killing the very thing that might make it work.

If access to education is provided throughout life, individuals can up-date on information and skills as need arises. Life-long learning embodies a principle of social justice: people have a right to access life-enhancing sources of learning, even if they dropped out of school early, or chose not to go to a traditional university on leaving school. Hence the need for entry to educational programmes that do not have prerequisites. This is the idea of “open education,” catered for in part by TAFE and external studies attached to designated universities. After open entry, progression has in the past been contingent upon passing each year, a principle now considered commercially inconvenient, as we have seen.

External studies relied on one-way devices such as post, radio and TV, which severely restricted access in terms of the time, place, and mode of learning. Enter information technology (IT), the internet, and “flexible” learning, which changed all this. Now, contact anywhere in the world can be virtually instantaneous and interactive; complex programs and data-bases can be downloaded and used in one’s own home. The consequences are immense. Essentially, it means that teacher and student, and student and student, are not bound by time and space, or by the need for a common physical campus, although that helps.

The implications for teaching and learning are not well understood. Many see the net just as a vast store of information, in which can be included one’s own lecture notes. This is dangerous, as it encourages the view that teaching is simply the transfer of factual knowledge. To think that one is using IT appropriately by putting one’s notes on the

web is equivalent to filming a book, page by page, and then going to the cinema to read it. Likewise, IT should not be used simply to transmit huge amounts of information, however prettily programs like PowerPoint may do it. Liberating the teaching/learning situation from space and time constraints is an exciting and important paradigm shift in teaching. It makes life-long learning much more technically possible. Interactive on-line teaching offers new possibilities of teaching, learning and assessment modes that are not possible in a conventional university teaching site.

None of this invalidates the functions of conventional universities, although it might suggest some ways in which they could carry out some of those functions more effectively. Neither does it say that universities are the best institutions to be the base for life-long learning for all. On the contrary, this is such a new and developing notion, it is surely evident that a new kind of institution, specifically designed for the job *ab initio*, would be more viable than adapting an existing institution, designed for quite a different social role. It seems so obvious.

Commercial considerations aside, there is a splendid opportunity here to research and develop this new way of teaching and learning. It is hugely adaptable. It could be used for science and humanities subjects, for vocational subjects, for recreational or special interest topics, at any level, at any time in life. And yes, we could arrange for credit transfers in suitable instances, so that students learn some aspects under one distance learning institution and others from another, as long as equivalence of standards can be assured. But there is nothing about this that says we must *sell* the courses! Again, this is so obvious.

As soon as the IT revolution is tied to the economic rationalist notion that education is a private good, and that people should pay for it, we get the same problems noted here and in *UIC* but now on a global scale. Universities from all over the world compete, and in that event, why should Australians enrol at their local university website when they can log on to get a Harvard or an Oxford degree? An extremely unpleasant scenario becomes likely. Australian universities, the basic research they should normally be carrying out, and the spin-off generated for industry, for health, and for our general social and cultural welfare, much of it specifically designed for Australian conditions, would cease to exist.

If that is seen as too apocalyptic by far, the then Vice-Chancellor of UNSW, John Niland, predicted just that. The United States, he said, would be home to about half of the “leading or eminent” institutions of higher learning; Britain and China would be well represented in the remaining half, but most countries would be lucky to have “one or two institutions that could be termed ‘world class’.”⁵⁸ Niland said this in the course of an interview in Hong Kong, where he was setting up a lavish permanent office, as part of the process of making UNSW that university for Australia: hence UNSW’s permanent offices all over South-East Asia.

Financing universities by participating in a global market, therefore, is already predicted, by those who should know, to spell immeasurable hurt for all but one or two of our universities, not to mention our cultural welfare. No doubt it would be argued that the loss of Australian universities and their research is not important, as we can use the results of Harvard or Cambridge based research. But then we become the second hand user of new discoveries, and we lose out on all fronts. Many blame the fall in the Australian dollar precisely on our being seen overseas as a derivative country, lacking research and development in the new technologies.

Thus, one consequence of globalisation on this scale is that the local “knowledge industry” becomes seriously down-sized (to continue with the business-speak). Another is that if education is pecking at a keyboard and watching a small screen, it is even more impersonal than today’s huge classes. Yet another consequence arises out of the notion of competition.

It may be possible that market forces can work to knead quality out of a dough of offerings, but it does not seem likely. For example, would the addition of another three commercial TV channels improve quality and diversity? Or would we end up with six look-alike channels, each competing for the majority taste? I would suggest the latter. Likewise, the most likely effect of financing universities by hits-on-line would surely be that they try to attract more customers. And you do that, when in mass-marketing mode, by making the product cheaper, or in this case by making the qualification easier to get. You lower standards, and homogenise course content so that it fits other course requirements and expectations. No focusing on the particular expertise of a department because that attracts fewer rather than more students; no prerequisites, because they restrict numbers; increase pass rates with inflated grades, because students will be

happy to pay for High Distinctions. That is what happens when knowledge is treated as a marketable commodity, and it is happening already, as *UIC* makes clear. Unless great care is taken, a mass credit transfer system simply pulls everyone down to the lowest common denominator.⁵⁹

What's the answer?

In an important sense, we seem to have come full circle, back to the horrors of Tasmania in the 1950s, but now on an international level. What the University of Tasmania was to the Australian scene, the Australian universities are to the international scene. The chief issues linking the Orr case with the present are finance, a properly resourced and supported teaching/learning environment, academic self-government, and tenure. Before the Royal Commission, the State Government of Tasmania starved the University of funds, as the Commonwealth Government today starves the system as a whole. Academic tenure was so weak in the days of Orr that it took only a couple of weeks to summarily dismiss a University of Tasmania professor, and today redundancies clauses even override tenure.

But then in Tasmania the tide turned. Collegiality and self-government through a powerful professorial board, demanded by Tasmanian academics in 1954, and supported by the Royal Commission, became a reality. For a while, there was some promise that an exemplary university system would evolve in Australia, dedicated to “the vigorous pursuit of truth, however unorthodox it might seem to be,” as Prime Minister Menzies put it. But soon after he put such a system in place, his successors from both sides of the political spectrum were intent on destroying it. Promising the bread of reform, successive Australian governments, both Labor and Liberal, each for their own ideological reasons, offered an authoritarian stone on which genuine academic values choked and died.

What has happened in little more than ten years has been the loss of a genuine university system through heavy-handed government intervention. While the rhetoric refers to excellence in research and teaching, the machinery that can actualise that rhetoric has been dismantled and reassembled to serve the competitive world of business. That new machinery prevents universities from fulfilling their prime function: constructing and disseminating universal

knowledge. Today, our tertiary system is no longer able to fulfil its proper function in the community. And the people of Australia should be very angry about that because they have been sold short.

The trouble is that the public had, for a time, swallowed the economic rationalist shibboleth, TINA. People came to believe the line pushed by successive governments and by most academic administrators that there is simply no alternative to the proposal that universities *must* become corporatised and work in conjunction with big business.

But why must they? Money can always be found for activities deemed important. William Smith O'Brien, when denouncing in parliament the British government's niggardly educational expenditure of 1841, demonstrated that it comprised only one-hundredth of the defence budget.⁶⁰ Similarly, the 1955 Royal Commission on the University of Tasmania, showed the falsity of the State government's claim to lack the funds to provide decent accommodation for its university. Money available for the purpose had been ploughed into the Hydro-Electric Corporation,⁶¹ a more profitable venture for the Tasmanian Government. The conclusion is inescapable — call it “abysmally parochial” if you like — that the subversion of universities is like economic rationalism itself, a deliberate choice by politicians who legislated to get it that way.

This is not to say that universities should never make money, or refuse to co-operate in any way with business. Of course they should, so long as they remain uncompromised. However, because universities are essential national resources, the government is obliged to fund them sufficiently out of public funds to preserve their independence and integrity from any outside force, including governments themselves. Accountability does not mean slavish dependence on the short-term fads of a particular ministry, but the exercise of critical intelligence on behalf of the community as a whole.

Critics may well ask: “If you don't like the system, what do you propose to put in its place?” The answer is really quite simple. When you are attacked by a man-eating tiger, you passionately desire its absence, not its replacement. Just remove the economic rationalist tiger from the universities; that is all. Of course, there is a need to provide a workforce with a post-secondary education, but there is no need to require *all* post-secondary institutions to conform to the same managerial structure and priorities appropriate for that particular economic purpose. Thirty-six institutions now call themselves

universities, 27 of which have enrolments exceeding 16,000 students. There are 33,000 academic staff, comparatively few of whom are probably even faintly interested in “untrammelled research.” We don’t need anything like 36 post-secondary institutions with the financing and infrastructure required for them to operate as proper universities.

The purposes that the traditional university uniquely filled could be met by only a few such institutions. Peter Karmel has proposed that the Australian government set up some ten national research centres, located in universities where there is suitable infrastructure, and under a national statutory body, which “should be removed from political influence.”⁶² The cost? About \$150 million, about 3 to 4 per cent of Commonwealth expenditure on education. As for teaching in the basic sciences and humanities:

Some 20 to 25 national faculties of arts and science should be set up to maintain a critical mass of high level scholars, and to attract the top 20 per cent or so of students.

The cost for this, Karmel estimates, is roughly the same as for the ten research centres: \$150 million, or one tenth of the savings the Commonwealth has achieved through the introduction of HECS.⁶³ Both propositions would cost less than the Commonwealth Government recently spent on publicising the GST.

Putting it another way, for well under ten per cent of current Commonwealth expenditure on education, it would be possible to revive a proper university system, while allowing the corporatised post-secondary institutions to continue to sell their vocational wares on the national and international markets. The new universities need not be elitist; we could reflect, not without irony, the words of the 1964 Martin Report (proposing a new advanced education sector), that the new university sector be “equal but different.”⁶⁴ A major difference would be that academic freedom, tenure and fundamental, interest-driven personal research would apply to these institutions in a way that they cannot apply to all 36 corporatised post-secondary institutions.

A decision on this scale is obviously something a government has to do. That means people have to be vocal, and make politicians realise that there are votes in higher education. Concerted academic effort cannot now be organised easily through internal university power structures because those structures no longer are functional.

Things might have seemed even more hopeless in the 1950s, yet Australian academics, with support from colleagues globally — that word is used advisedly — acted collectively and Australian universities were pulled into line. With the publication of *UIC*, books like *Why universities matter*,⁶⁵ and the establishment of the Association for the Public University,⁶⁶ it may be that the tide is turning, and that Australian universities will redefine their role so that they, or a portion of them, can serve academic values and functions in the new millennium.

Acknowledgement

I am greatly indebted to Richard Davis for many detailed comments on this chapter, and in particular for his contribution on the de Blas case.

Notes

1. “A bedrock that’s not set in stone,” *The Australian*, 6 September, 2000. Emphasis added.
2. “Identity crisis,” *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 4 September, 1996.
3. *The Australian*, 2 September, 1996.
4. The majority and minority reports are available on http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/EET_CTTE/public%20uni/report/index.htm
5. “Ignorant MPs fiddle as our unis burn,” *The Australian*, September 28, 2001.
6. Ibid.
7. Benjamin Haslem “Coalition rejects uni crisis funding,” *The Australian*, September 29, 2001.
8. Letter to the Editor, *Sunday Morning Post*, 19 March, 2000.
9. P. Karmel, “Funding universities” in T. Coady (Ed.), *Why universities matter*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000.
10. Ibid.
11. Reported by Erica Cervini “Universities: a grey crisis,” *The Sunday Age*, August 26, 2001.
12. See Elizabeth Wynhausen, “Dumb struck,” *The Weekend Australian*, 22-23 July, 2000.
13. Erica Cervini, “Universities: a grey crisis,” *The Sunday Age*, August 26, 2001.

14. Reported by Jane Richardson and Dorothy Illing, "New class of professional misconduct," *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, September 23, 1998.

15. N. Gillespie & M. Walsh, in a paper given to Australian Higher Education Industrial Association, reported in "Sick, tired and totally stressed," *Campus Review*, 15-22 March, 2000.

16. Jane Richardson and Dorothy Illing, "Warning on global rankings," *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, September 23, 1998.

17. J. Biggs, "When academia loses value," *Sunday Morning Post*, 13 February, 2000.

18. Warren Osmond, "Hong Kong students told to stay at home," *Campus Review*, 29 March-4 April, 2000.

19. See Russell Blackford, "Don't panic: The universities and their troubles," *Quadrant*, Jan-Feb 1999, pp.11-17. Summarised in *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 13 January 1999, p. 11.

20. Op. cit., p. 13

21. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August, 1999.

22. Andrew Norton, "Why education free-for-all doesn't have the numbers," *The Australian*, October 3, 2001.

23. Blackford, op. cit., p. 14.

24. Ibid.

25. Dr Craig McInnis, *The Work Roles of Academics in Australian Universities*, DETYA, June 1999, p. 5.

26. Oliver Mayo, CSIRO geneticist, writing in *The Australian*, 3 January, 2001.

27. I am indebted to Richard Davis for this account.

28. Moya Fyfe, "Concern at uni stand on Mount Lyell thesis," *Mercury*, 27 May 1994.

29. Cathryn Thompson, "Gagged by pollution," interview with Alexandra de Blas, *Togatus*, No. 3, 1993. See also similar interview, *Daily Planet*, No. 25, July-August 1993, pp. 16-17.

30. *Mercury*, 27 May 1994.

31. *Mercury*, 28 May 1994.

32. *Sunday Tasmanian*, 29 May 1994.

33. *Daily Planet*, No. 31, July-August, 1994.

34. Karmel, op. cit.

35. Blackford, op. cit.

36. Emeritus Professor J. Legge, who was Dean of Arts at Monash, and one of Australia's foremost historians, was retired at the time the announcement was made, but retained an office in the Arts Building. He attended a meeting of Faculty Board, where he expressed in very balanced and unemotive terms, as an historian and previous Dean of the Faculty, his opposition to the planned downsizing of the Arts Faculty. Next day, Vice-

Chancellor Robinson sent him a memo forbidding him from using the office. When questioned, the VC said honorary staff should “confine their interests and actions to focused academic effort and in no way abuse the hospitality of their host” (*Campus Review*, August 12-18, 1998, p. 2). However, there was considerable criticism from staff and press exposure, and a few days later Robinson changed his mind. Legge was allowed to retain the office.

37. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February, 1999.

38. *UIC*, p. 144.

39. J.B. Biggs, *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999, p. 99.

40. *Higher Education: a Policy Discussion Paper*, circulated by the Hon J S. Dawkins MP Minister for Employment, Education and Training, December 1987 (*Green Paper*), p. 36.

41. Biggs, op. cit., Chapter 9.

42. *Ibid.*

43. “Redress for uni’s ‘poor course’,” *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 4 August, 1998.

44. Biggs, op. cit.

45. “From a flood of tears to scandal,” *The Australian*, 26 January, 2001, p. 4.

46. “Destroy memo, Uni chief wrote,” *The Australian*, January 26, 2001, pp. 1 and 4.

47. Cassandra Pybus, *Gross Moral Turpitude: The Orr Case Reconsidered*, Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993.

48. Ann Clark, in “A student of optimism,” *The Australian*, 1 January, 2001.

49. Each of these incidents involves a different person. Prudence prevents me from being more specific about the detail, and especially about where they occurred.

50. Reported in *UIC*, Chapter 5, para 7.

51. C. Kayrooz, P. Kinnear & P. Preston, *Academic Freedom and the Commercialisation of Australian Universities*, The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper No 37, March 2001.

52. Barry Jones, in “Labor chief attacks cowardice of academe,” *Campus Review*, 12-18 August, 1998. And later, when the Howard Government cut \$2 billion from the universities, Senator Kim Carr accused the vice-chancellors of failing to defend their universities: “Silent VCs slammed in Labor attack on cuts,” *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 2 December, 1998.

53. *Green Paper*, p. 58.

54. *Green Paper*, p. 31.

55. *Green Paper*, p. 54.

56. *Green Paper*, p. 57.

57. *Green Paper*, pp. 46 & 67.

58. Interview in *Campus Post*, *South China Morning Post*, 26 October, 2000.

59. *Business Review Weekly* of 28 July, 2000, made this issue their lead article: "Degrees for sale," by Nicholas Way. His synopsis: "Manipulating a vital flow of cash from fee paying students means universities are under pressure to ensure these students pass — a process, academics concede privately, is 'dumbing down' the system."

60. *Hansard*, Vol. 59, 6 April 1841, speech pp. 943-48.

61. *Report of the Royal Commission on University of Tasmania*, Hobart, 1955, pp. 48-49.

62. Peter Karmel, "Take care of our tall poppies," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February, 1999. See also lead article, P. Karmel, "Intellectual Implosion," *Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia News*, 21, March 1999, 1-5.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Report of the Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia*. Canberra, 1964.

65. T. Coady (Ed.), *Why universities matter*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000.

66. <http://www.publicuni.org/>.