Changes of Culture and Purpose in Australian Universities: 1988 to the present

Rodney Nillsen*
University of Wollongong
New South Wales, Australia

> It is always easy to let the age have its head;
> the difficult thing is to keep one's own.
>
> *G. K. Chesterton*

Abstract

In July 1988, the then Minister of Education, Employment and Training for the Commonwealth of Australia, the Hon. John Dawkins MP, released a document called "Higher Education: a policy statement". The document, which became known as "The White Paper", set out the Labor Government's policy for higher education, and it challenged, and overturned, many of the attitudes in government policies of the past. It set new policies, procedures and objectives for higher education in Australia. Have these changes been beneficial or deleterious? In this paper, it is the intention to describe these polices and their effects, in broad terms, with an emphasis on the changed culture and perceived purposes of universities in Australia. It will be argued that there have been some beneficial effects. But the notion of universities as corporate institutions, the emphasis on profit as an intellectual incentive, the perception of students as customers, and the idea that universities should respond in an immediate sense to government directives under a guise of "accountability", have weakened and narrowed the educational, intellectual and human ideals traditionally associated with universities. However, these changes should not simply be seen as special to universities. Rather, they should be seen as an area of public policy which is revealing of changes in some of the underlying assumptions in western societies.

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1 Introduction

In the 1980s, Australia had a mixed system of higher education. In 1987, there were about 20 universities, 15 Colleges of Advanced Education, and 10 Institutes of Technology. The colleges provided post-secondary school qualifications that generally were more vocational than those provided in the universities, although universities taught for the professions such as medicine and law. Research in the universities was generally of a more conceptual and basic nature and concentrated in the traditional disciplines, while in the colleges it was more sporadic and mostly directed to more immediate business and community needs. In July 1988, the then Minister of Education, Employment and Training for the Commonwealth of Australia, John Dawkins, released a document called "Higher Education: a policy statement", which became known as "The White Paper" [7]. It is not an exaggeration to say that the policies of the White Paper were revolutionary. However, the new policies and thinking took years to filter incrementally through the university system, before having the effects fully in evidence today. The White Paper marked a fundamental change in the thinking of the government, and of subsequent governments, about the nature and purpose of universities. It set out the Labor Government's policy for higher education, and it challenged, and overturned, many of the attitudes in government policies of the past. It set new procedures and new objectives for higher education in Australia.

Although the new attitudes were to be incremental in their effects, rather than everything changing overnight, some things *did* change quickly.[1] Perhaps the most obvious ones were the conversion of some colleges into universities by simply making name changes, and the forced amalgamations of other colleges with the existing universities. This was part of what the Government meant by having a "unified national system" of higher education. Also, whereas universities had generally been ignored by government, now a whole new "language" sprang up, emanating from the government but rapidly taken up by the universities, in

[1] There was lack of political awareness as many academics, especially in the older universities, were slow to take the changes seriously and realize what they meant. See Tony Coady's comments in [4, pages x-xii]. Many academics within the humanities and social sciences supported the changes to increase participation in university education, because the measures were perceived as "anti-elitist", but little was said on other aspects of the new policies.

which discourse concerning universities now took place. This new "language" was limited and mediocre in the extreme, but anything lying outside its conceptual framework was to be ignored, or simply dismissed. Other implications of the new policies were to become more apparent over the next few years, including the reduction of government funding, in proportion, with the idea of forcing universities to become self-funding as much as possible. The number of students was to increase markedly and, as the new terminology expressed it, students were to be regarded as "customers" and universities were to be seen as businesses or "service providers", and students were to pay fees. Decison making was to be less collegial and much more from the "top down", as in business. Although it was not stated by the Government in such terms, a bureaucratic, commercial and management culture was to become the norm for universities, with an accompanying diminution of awareness of the educational, liberal and moral functions of knowledge, and of intellectual discovery. In effect, at the official levels, "education" was to become much more like "training", "knowledge" was to be regarded more as "information", "scholarship" was to gradually fade in favour of more tangible and assessable activities, and intellectual discovery through research was to be valued more than before by how much funding it attracted and, more recently, upon such bases as citation rates and in what journals the work was published.[2]

The reason for mentioning these features of the White Paper in some detail is that the policies, ideas and rhetoric in it are still in essence the policies, ideas and rhetoric of today. Ever since it was announced, the ideas in it, both explicit and implicit, have been accepted and carried further by successive governments, of both political persuasions. The fundamental assumptions in the White Paper have not been questioned by governments, and hardly by the universities. The ideas and philosophy of the White Paper have still a long way to go, if their logic is accepted on its own terms.[3] My comments here are intended to refer mainly to the university situation in Australia, but there is a lot in common with other English-speaking countries, the United Kingdom in particular.

2 Idealism and reality

The White Paper expressed policies and ideas that were not without their own idealism, in that there was a genuine wish to incorporate universities more into the mainstream of society, and to bring greater benefit to society as a whole. It was felt that universities should be contributing more directly to the economy and to the country's material aspirations and improvement. There was little doubt that there were problems in the universities.

[2]This culminated in the *Excellence in Research for Australia* exercise carried out in 2010 for the first time. It attempted to measure research output and quality by how many publications were produced and in what journals, these being rated A*, A, B, or C. This ranking scheme has been abandoned after one year, as announced by the government minister Kim Carr in 2011, although it's not clear what modifications there will be.

[3]There have been numerous reports into higher education over the intervening period. The most recent, and probably the most significant, is the Bradley Report [1]. It envisages that 40% of 25- to 34-year olds will have attained at least a bachelor level qualification by 2020, and that by the same year 20% of enrolments in higher education will be of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Whatever might be said of these targets, they are a continuation of the thinking in the 1988 White Paper.

Undergraduate teaching, the primary responsibility of universities, could and should have been taken more seriously than it was. There were too many examples of lackadaisical and inadequate teaching. Also, for those courses more closely associated with specific professional areas, there was scope for integrating teaching more with the workplace, and with developing better connections between industry, business and research. As well, there was a problem with the small amount of research carried out by business and industry in Australia. An aim of policy was that universities should solve this problem, or at least contribute towards a solution, even if it was not of their making in the first place.

But the new policies showed scant knowledge, let alone respect, for universities, and took the way to change universities as more-or-less self evident. There was virtually no consideration of possible effects apart from those the government wished to immediately achieve, and there was virtually no public discussion or consultation. Universities themselves were expected to simply accept the new policies as a given. It was not to their credit, in my view, that they did just that, virtually without a murmur. The current Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University was more-or-less right when he said, as reported [6] in 2008:

> University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis ... told the [Higher Education Supplement] this was the first time in living memory universities had decided to take charge of their own futures rather than allow government to determine policy. [This was in reference to possible course changes prior to the Rudd government's presumed policy overhaul].

As it was, there was an atmosphere of fear for a period, as a particular and limited view of the complex question of the relationship between universities and wider society was simply imposed, with a mediocre, unreflective and empty language to accompany it. It did not seem to the formulators of the new policies that they should seriously consider that by simply conforming to the standards and expectations of government, universities could lose their distinctive functions of critique, questioning and independent investigation of issues, as well as the capacity for providing an intellectual and moral compass for society. The humanistic and distinctive values and functions which universities had embodied were simply to disappear, at least by implication. But the authors of the White Paper sought to defend it against such concerns [7, page 5]:

> Within this framework, however, the Government readily acknowledges the legitimacy of concerns expressed by many respondents. To the extent that the Policy Discussion paper [a draft of the White Paper] sought to emphasise the need for change without also explaining the associated need for maintenance of valuable traditions, it may not have given an adequate impression of Government intentions.

A further claim in the White Paper was that university autonomy was to increase. Given the actual content of the policies, this was ridiculous. Professor Peter Karmel expressed it very politely [10, page 13] when he wrote:

> The new arrangements are supposed to result in less interference with the internal management of institutions and less regulation than the former ones....But senior institutional administrators do not agree .... The flow of requests ... for information, the requirements for establishing the educational profiles of institutions, the conditions attached to the approval of profiles and the financial pressures for amalgamation all point to greater not less intervention.

In these cases, the reality obviously was going to be different from what the White Paper was claiming, but over time it became standard procedure to claim for a policy an alleged set of effects while, in reality, the effects clearly would be different. Despite some of the apparently well-intentioned statements in the White Paper, in the longer run there was no serious attempt to implement policy changes in a more complex and nuanced way that would have respected universities for their achievements, and that kept a place for the distinctive rôle they could play in society, and for the values they could contribute. There has been and there continues to be a barely-concealed contempt for universities. In the longer run, just about everything has become subservient to the immediacies of Government priorities. The rather faint idealism apparent in some parts of the white paper collapsed, and was been reduced to numerical targets and endless procedures which, whatever effect they have had, often have had little to do with real quality. As a consequence, through a combination of exerted power and their own internal moral and intellectual weaknesses, universities allowed their voice in society to be greatly diminished — a voice that was weak yet distinct before the White paper, but one that has now almost entirely disappeared. As Greg Craven, Vice-Chancellor of the Australian Catholic University, has said recently [5]:

> ...institutionally all universities all the time stand as inhibitions to all power, be that media, government or business...Vice-Chancellors don't necessarily see themselves as leaders of institutions that do that. Universities are vessels of public intellectualism, and they need to speak and be heard, and that has probably been our biggest failing in Australia.

3 A new language

A significant feature of the changes in the Australian university sector following the Dawkins policies has been the use of language. At the beginning in 1988, the change in language was marked, and it continued for a long period. It built to a crescendo which has diminished in more recent times, perhaps because its success left it with a reduced reason to be pursued. The new language was taken from government, management and the corporate world and, by the disaffected, it was called "Dawksquawk". Language which, in the traditional university context, had had a descriptive and analytical function which could be described as having been "neutral" in its tone, now became a tool of exhoration and for accepting and imposing the new culture. Although it was not outwardly deliberate for the most part, and although the way it was used was seemingly unconscious, underlying it all was a view of language that held it was legitimate to use it in a crude way for the new "correct" and " approved" purposes. Language was perceived as a way of furthering immediate objectives, and there was to be little concern about the values this entailed and its effects upon the quality of discourse about university issues. The recipients of the "approved" rhetoric were meant to simply acquiesce, at least publicly, and by-and-large they did so. There was a mindlessness about the new mantra-like culture in universities that showed a lack of awareness of the moral and ethical aspects of language, by regarding it as a tool for management and for manipulation of attitudes. University managements, as they now were, were generally quick to sense the way the wind was blowing, and the new language was adopted uncritically, as means of furthering a positive perception of themselves by the government. Some academics

saw opportunities for career advancement by adopting the new jargon and catch phrases, since these functioned as signs of a preparedness to co-operate with the new culture.

The decline in the quality of language in talking of universities should be seen against the wider backdrop of public life. In his books "Death Sentence" and "Weasel Words"[19, 20] Don Watson, an adviser to the former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, documented the debased public language used in Australia by governments, corporations and universities. Shelley Gare [9] in her entertaining and serious book "The Triumph of the Airheads", drew attention to both the hilarious and serious effects that inadequate language has upon thought, and *vice versa*. Outside Australia, Frances Wheen's caustic book [21] "How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World" had some similar themes and, as Stefan Collini's incisive article [3] shows, there are similarities with what is happening in the United Kingdom. See also [4, 13, 18] for discussion of related cultural changes more specific to Australian universities.

As a specific example of how the language and culture of higher education changed is illustrated by the *Australian Universities Quality Agency* (AUQA). This is just to take a specific example, not to express any particular animus towards AUQA. AUQA was established in 2000

> ...with responsibility for quality audits of higher education institutions and accreditation authorities, reporting on performance and outcomes, assisting in quality enhancement, advising on quality assurance, and liaising internationally with quality agencies in other jurisdictions, for the benefit of Australian higher education.

But AUQA had its own notion of what "quality" was. A typical dictionary description of the meaning of the word in this context says something like "of a high standard" or "excellence". The word has always had a connotation of something intrinsic, rather than something measurable. But now, "quality" was to be understood as "fitness for purpose". This meant that AUQA was not to be concerned with *actual* quality as normally understood, and as would have been expected from the official description of AUQA's responsibilities. Rather, it seemed that no judgments would be made about the purpose or standard of what was achieved, only whether there were procedures that were "fit for purpose". Either there was to be no interest in quality as such or, if there was such an interest, it was only to the extent that it could be gauged by procedures. This led to a proliferation of procedures as universities willingly fitted in to what I would describe as a "machine model" that supposedly ensured quality. And because the word "quality" summons up in the mind an image of intrinsic worth, high standards and excellence, there was a tendency to play on these traditional meanings while, at the same time, the word was used in an entirely mundane way that simply involved "box-ticking" to see what procedures were in place for a given purpose. It was apparently held, as a matter of faith, that there were "right" procedures that would guarantee quality, and so we heard a great deal about quality *assurance*, and we still do. Of course, every so often these procedures break down and then there is the irony that while we have a proliferation of "quality assurance", we clearly have not *assured* quality for, apart from clear breakdowns, counterexamples are obvious enough. However, in its use of words and phrases, AUQA was simply following precedents and its behaviour should not be singled out. Even well before the advent of 2000, "excellence" and "quality" were ubiquitous words and "quality assurance" an equally ubiquitous phrase. The biographer Hazel Rowley [17] said as early as 1996:

> ..never before has there been so much talk of "excellence and quality assurance" and never before [has there been] so little concern for either.

As a concept, quality is no longer taken seriously unless it can be quantified. But the notion that quality is only quality to the extent that it can be quantified is both a conflation of language and a contradiction in terms. Once quality is defined in terms of process or quantity, the *actual* quality of anything is no longer recognized. By then, real quality has been defined out of existence, either by some sort of counting process, or by having processes or procedures that supposedly "assure" quality. "Quality" is now a degraded word whose true meaning is struggling to survive, and it is not the only example. In effect, an important concept, that one would have thought to be essential in a university context, is being lost. In the prevailing managerial mindset, anything that cannot be measured does not exist, and is not to be taken seriously. Knowledge, conscientiousness, perseverance, inspiration and talent have no place in the machine concept of quality, for they lie beyond procedures and any easy measurement and so, the (implicit) logic goes, they have no place in discussions of quality. In this way, the misuse of language leads to a marked lack of reality, a narrowing of perspectives, and the discussion of important matters becomes distorted, confused and, sometimes, ridiculous. Confusions abound in any area of pubic policy where words and phrases become slogans, either through carelessness, or lack of thought, or to serve some disguised ulterior purpose. Language then sags and collapses under the weight of the contradictions and emptiness it has to bear. A mindless, restricted, or warped language cuts off possibilities, inhibits the open identification of problems, and makes their possible solution more difficult. It limits ideas and possibilities. It hides issues and avoids open discussion, and it produces insincerity and hypocrisy, with a corresponding effect on morale. It raises ethical issues that, despite fine phrases about ethical awareness, are virtually never acknowledged.

Apart from "quality", there are other words and phrases that are commonly used that are symptomatic of the changes. The word "integrity" has now come to refer almost solely to "plagiarism", a common problem in universities. Of course, "integrity" has a positive connotation while "plagiarism" has a strongly negative one, so that it is often considered preferable to say "there is a lack of integrity", rather than to say "there is a problem with plagiarism". In effect, "integrity" has become a euphemism for referring to plagiarism. It means that a lack of integrity is now taken to refer only to plagiarism whereas, in fact, a lack of integrity covers, or should cover, a far wider range of issues, including how language itself is used.

Another word that is loosely used is "internationalization". With this word, it is often hard to know whether it is referring to the fact that a significant proportion of student enrollments arises from overseas students, or whether it refers to making university curriculums more international in terms of awareness of other cultures or actual content, or whether it refers to a financial strategy for gaining funding for universities through international enrolments. Words and phrases are simply hurled around to create a certain atmosphere, and often with little regard to their meaning.[4] For myself, although my reaction may be

[4] Some of the other words and phrases characteristic of the changed environment have been: economic rationalism, key performance indicators, diversity, customers, services, providers, stakeholders, the leading edge, punching above your weight, quality assurance, innovation, accountability, it's the way to go, transparency, competitive, end-users, service providers, clients, mission statement, vision, equality of outcomes, the bottom line, focussed, best practice, creativity.

quite rare, it has been distressing to see humane and conscientious people succumbing to the empty language and logic of what are now corporate institutions, with the qualities and values that those words conjure up.

4 Teaching, knowledge and research

The notion that students were little more than “customers” degraded the conception of the relationship between the teacher and the student, but it did have one good effect. That was to make staff feel under more of an obligation to take undergraduate teaching more seriously. In fact, some considered at the time that this effect, in itself, was sufficient excuse for regarding students as customers. This was, incidentally, evidence of the power of institutional language to affect individual academic behaviour. However, the use of the term “customer” for “student” also had the effect of regarding education as a commercial transaction, and reducing it to a commodity, which was also in line with the idea that universities were businesses. But the feeling that staff should make more effort than before to make their subject content more intelligible to students was justified in many ways, especially given some of the attitudes of the past. This was an example of bad policy that had some good effects.

Over time, universities established “meta-teaching” units, whose staff conduct workshops and courses related to teaching and learning. Grants, from both internal and external sources, became available for projects designed to improve teaching and learning. Awards for good teaching were introduced in an endeavour to raise the status of teaching within universities. The government imposed obligations upon universities to cater for students with disabilities and those who needed adjustments made in their studies and assessment, although the resources it provided to universities to do this have been limited or non-existent.[5] The effects of these changes have been mixed.

Some very substantial efforts have gone into programs designed to provide additional help to students of weaker academic background, and to those with special needs. Other programs have proposed different methods of assessment, sometimes based on the idea that students will have no wish to learn unless it is closely related to the final mark they will receive. Ironically, this takes a negative view of students’ wish to learn (a contrary view is argued in [13], and see also [14]). Still others have placed importance on using technology in teaching and learning, developing materials specifically for the purpose. But there has been an over-emphasis, in my view, on the use of the new technologies, which are often a distraction from fundamental issues in teaching and learning. The adage “to a man with a hammer, everything is a nail”, is apposite. Many ideas about teaching have been at a very general level — so general, that they sometimes appear vacuous.

Another change has been the dropping of compulsory prerequisites for subjects, at least in many cases. The responsibility for decisions concerning subject choice has, at one level, been shifted from the institution in giving advice that a certain subject cannot or should not

[5]It is a characteristic of government in dealing with universities that obligations are always increasing, but with little or no recognition of the resources, time and effort required to meet them. Academics, being at the end of the policy line, often have to “pick up the tab”. Internally, university managements often have the same approach to increasing obligations upon staff, to carry out further procedures or assessment, etc.

be taken, to making the student responsible for his or her own decision to take a subject. But this is at only one level. Although the responsibility for subject choice may be, at the most literal level, that of the student, the teaching staff have a responsibility to make the material in their subject intelligible to the student. Staff still have a responsibility even though a condition for prerequisite knowledge has been removed. In some cases it has been virtually impossible to impose prerequisites, especially as this may affect the number of students who enroll, and this in turn means that course content, assessment and intellectual levels can be affected.[6] The extent to which this is, or should be, a matter of concern has been hardly discussed, in line with the tendency not to openly identify fundamental issues or likely problems.

In discussions of teaching, education and learning, only rarely has there been a historical awareness of pertinent philosophical ideas, which go back at least to Plato. Everything is in a sealed-off and self-sufficient present, and this applies not only to ideas on teaching and learning. Consequently, there is a shallowness in the discussion of issues. But it should be a responsibility of universities to avoid what Alfred North Whitehead called "the evil of triviality", and one way to do that is to be aware of our own times as being anything but definitive. Universities are now tending to give to students only what society and the government are telling them that they immediately want. But, as Raymond Gaita says in [8, page 42]:

> Students who self-consciously speak of their studies in the language of their times, having learnt to speak no other, are likely to be prisoners of their times and will not have the words with which to name, and so to recognize, their inheritance. Sometimes, therefore, universities must resist their times if they are not to betray their students.

Having been through a period of increased value being placed on teaching, in Australia the rise of international ranking indices such as the Jiao Tong index have contributed to a greater importance being placed on research, with teaching reverting to a more lowly status. Thus, in 2011, the government announced it was abolishing the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, whose job it has been to encourage and improve tertiary reaching, and award grants for that purpose. As noted by Professor Frank Larkins [12]:

> There is a clear trend of universities diverting more income to research in terms of their total operating expenditure .... you cannot continue to [cross-subsidise to that extent] and preserve the quality of your other programs.

Over the period, the government has encouraged more research links between universities, industry and business. This was, in part, a way of making universities more responsible for their own research funding, but it was also government policy to make university research more immediately relevant to the needs of Australia, as it perceived them to be. Also, with public funds, universities were used to make up for the deficiencies of business and industry in Australia in failing to carry out research at their own initiative. More grants for doing

[6] The Australian Universities Quality Agency generally avoided such issues. But there has been a type of reaction in that the government in 2011 has established the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, which is expected to monitor and maybe impose standards for universities, although how is not yet clear. It will be interesting to see to what extent it considers that procedures are sufficient to produce standards and quality.

joint university and industry research became available through the Australian Research Council and other sources. Centres, known as "Key Centres", were funded for research into projects of business and industrial applicability. The intellectual quality of all this research has varied considerably, from very high quality to activities that have been little more than market research for businesses or government organizations.

Ideas-orientated and basic research tends to remain concentrated in the older universities. But even there, whereas at one time the purpose for getting a research grant was to get money to carry out a specified research project, now the purpose was reversed: doing research was a way to get money, thus increasing the positive perception of the institution in the light of the new quantitative criteria. So, there has been a trend to ignore the research itself, unless it is easily understood by the government or a broad public, and look at the promotional benefits of research. In such an environment, researchers become technicians, and a wider sense of the unity of knowledge, of moral purpose, and of human struggle and achievement, become lost. Of course, the problem of the fragmentation of knowledge is a serious one, lying mostly beyond the scope of any government's policies, but this circumstance has contributed to the ease with which an older and higher conception of research has been replaced largely with a technical one.

The idea of the moral and human function of knowledge was based on a notion of truth, a word one rarely hears in the university environment of today. But the irony is that as a notion it remains essential, if unacknowledged. For, no matter how relativist one's epistemology, or how much one feels seduced by postmodern ideas of relativism or "difference", every assertion, even an assertion within relativism, asserts, or attempts or claims to assert, a truth. The hope for wider knowledge, and indeed science itself, rest upon a faith that there is an order, or truth, to be found, however that notion may be perceived or qualified. It is at once an irony and an inconsistency that the predominant concept of The University, which is purely secular, cannot acknowledge such an incompleteness in its own conception of itself.

5 Attitudes and philosophical issues

Within the universities, the postmodernist undermining of the potential for language to contain truth, and even of the concept of truth itself, contributed to an unexpected alliance, if largely unrecognized, between the "left" and the "right". Both the "left" and the "right" promoted an agenda of intellectual and moral relativism. On the one hand, for the "left", relativism derived from the view that reality was a mere human construct; consequently people were held to construct their own realities, between which there was no valid basis for passing a judgment, whether intellectual, ethical or moral. On the other hand, for the "right", reality was again a human construct; but in the mind-set of "conservative" economic liberals, it derived from market forces, so that intellectual worth and even values were to be derived from market demand. The irony was that neither of these rather unlikely bed-fellows seemed to realize the other was in the same bed. By making such a fetish of market forces in all contexts, regardless of circumstances, economic liberal ideas reduced education, values and intellectual achievement to the status of commodities.[7] This has not altogether removed

[7]For a discussion that puts more precision into what is meant by regarding education as a commodity, and by education as opposed to training, see[16], for example.

the sense and tradition of high moral purpose which had been a characteristic of universities, but it has reduced it drastically, so that that type of purpose has become but a shadow of before. This tradition continues on due to those individuals to whom it is important, even the *raison d'être* for being in a university, but it has virtually no institutional presence. This was inevitable, as a consequence of the government concept of the university as little more than a corporation and a business, and with the acquiescence of the universities in it.

This was made easier because Australia's tradition of higher education had always had pronounced elements of practicality and pragmatism, with an unarticulated philosophical base. All this has meant that the potential for universities to give society more of a humanistic, intellectual and spiritual compass has been reduced.

The idea that universities should *benefit* society has become conflated with the idea that in their values and operations, universities should be the *same* as society. Edmund Burke supported individual freedoms, but at the same time considered that our concept of the society and the state should embody more than the "getting and spending" of modern liberal economics. He envisaged a diversity in society and the state, seeing society as an organism whose diverse parts contribute essentially to the health of the whole. As he writes in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [2, page 82]:

> Society is, indeed, a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure; but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with *other reverence*; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in all virtue and in all perfection. [8]

Burke's phrase "other reverence" is the right one in my view, since its religious tone suggests maybe that such reverence cannot be rationally justified. But, in our own secular and prosaic times, when we have an inability to adapt to anything outside our self-imposed mental restraints, an alternative may be to use instead the phrase "other respect". A problem with the situation in Australia, as in other English-speaking countries, is that there is now little of that "other respect" in the public domain. Rather, things are seen in materialistic terms,[9] and now are subservient to "the gross animal existence of a temporary and perish-

[8]This quotation from Burke was used in [13], but I consider he makes a point of such fundamental importance that I have not hesitated to use it again.

[9]It is highly ironic that materialism is endorsed both by so-called "conservative" economic liberalism and by Marxism. In relation to this, consider the comments of K. Marx and F. Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*: "The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part....The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his natural superiors, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous cash payment. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade." An aspect of this tone is that of admiration at the revolutionary effect of unrestrained economic freedom, and it has been commented upon also by Umberto Eco. Perhaps, one day, we shall see liberal economics acknowledging its debt to Marxism. But, as Burke says: "Freedom, to be enjoyed, must be restrained".

able nature", as Burke expresses it. An acquiescence in the idea that markets embody all conceivable wisdom and value remains implicit, despite the financial and social upheavals of recent times. It has produced an impoverishment in public discourse, and it has tended to reduce human and ethical values, and other intangible qualities, to the status of commodities or non-existence. Such acquiescence generally has not been explicit. But the viewing of all human situations only in terms of the marketplace leaves people with the feeling: "what else could there be?" Put in this way, the problem is one of "positivism" as Igor Kluvánek identified it in [11]:

> Every form of positivism elevates some facts to the dignity of principles, or axioms, to which all arguments in a given sphere of discussion are reduced. Such facts are thereby removed from among the targets of human cognitional activity.

Thus, what Igor Kluvánek identified as positivism limits the range of "admissible discourse". In the present context, the consequence is that what has validity is only that which can be measured, and this is elevated to the level of principle and lies beyond discussion. In Australia it is through positivistic arguments, based on the idea that only what is quantifiable has validity, that governments have successively justified their policies towards universities, and it is through an acceptance of positivism in this sense that universities have protected themselves from criticism from within, while acquiescing in the pressures successive governments have put upon them.

But if there is to be any place today for institutions that are in partnership with society, with a partnership that is more than one subservient only to the immediate material needs of society, but rather one whose values derive from the whole person and a sense of fellowship, then those institutions must surely be our universities. If universities do not embody that intangible *other reverence* or *other respect*, to which Burke refers, they cannot have that type of distinctiveness of function within society that would give them a reason for existing other than providing training or services for fees, or for financial support.

6 Conclusion

Changes in Australian universities were inevitable, in my view, because of changes in society. A more static society was one that would be far more inclined to leave universities alone. But changes in the past 25 years have been major. Society is now far more complex than ever before, and people need to be trained at a high level to manage that complexity. The capacity of capitalism in the West to produce economic growth, stability, and a high level of material prosperity over a long period remained unchallengeable until quite recently. In the financial sector, new and complex products were developed, needing new management skills which still, as it turned out, were not enough to understand the wider effects these new products could have. In business, the seemingly endless increase in competition meant that many needed to be trained in business, marketing, and management. Professional areas like law were in great demand. Areas of health and nursing that at one time were outside the university system now were considered to require a higher level of training. Technological developments required computer experts, programmers and technicians. In many of these areas, education was and remains secondary to training. But even in areas not so linked to

training in specific skills, the mode of teaching remains more that of training rather than education. The idea of education as an activity involving the whole person has become an anomaly in the face of the the machine-like mindset of wider society.

There are also more general effects. Technology has made possible the obsolescence of memory. Information is now instantaneously retrievable, and the need to remember and reflect is now often perceived as unnecessary. Such perception is governed by the idea that knowledge and understanding are simply facts, and that they exist independently of the response of the individual person. But whereas facts may be independent of the person, understanding is not; and it is understanding, synthesis and interpretation that govern our response to facts. We might say that knowledge and understanding have been "digitized" because, in our perception, they are no more than facts. Such a perception is implicit, more often than not, but that makes such underlying attitudes no less potent. We have digitized information and information, in its turn, has digitized us.

As universities acquiesce in these changes and current perceptions, they are relinquishing a view of education as being the capacity to make connections, to see things in relation to each other, to make judgments based on a wisdom deriving from analysis, knowledge, experience, and an awareness of the past. After all, universities are training people for employment, rather than educating them, and the corporate mind wants loyalty to the organization ahead of analysis, intellectual rigour, and a capacity for complex judgment. But, by allowing information and training to dominate over education, we become more like machines and less like human beings. There has been a marked tendency to regard change as inevitably beneficial. But any judgment as to the beneficial or deleterious effects of change depends upon a broader context and a larger picture than the changes themsleves. In Australia, that broader context and larger picture have been grossly neglected. But, it remains that the issues in universities are to do with how governments have implemented and managed change, the responses of the universities to circumstances without precedent, and with the overall effects and loss.

In Australia, there remain many inconsistencies in the attitudes of government and society towards universities, and there are some signs of reaction to the changes of the last twenty years. Universities in their mission statements and lists of qualities that they claim for their graduates, or aim to instill in their graduates, mention many that are associated with the traditional aims of a university education. Some of the rhetoric surrounding teaching sounds somewhat familiar to traditionalists, even if its realization in an inhospitable environment seems to be far away. Melbourne University has introduced a generalist undergraduate degree to be taken prior to graduate professional study. Some senior people within the university system continue to express concern at the lack of educational ideals as universities seek to follow government policies and accommodate themselves uncritically to wider prevailing attitudes. Following numerous instances where a university's corporate values have stifled academic freedoms, the Commonwealth Government is introducing legislation that will protect freedom of intellectual enquiry. And even some politicians, from time to time, as if in complete ignorance of all that governments have done, speak of universities as though they should be embodying the search for truth, scholarship, and intangible intellectual values.

But, whereas secular society in the West has for so long retained a sense of the transcendent and intangible in human existence, that sense has been on the retreat for a long period

and may well be headed for extinction. It is that retreat that is affecting ways of thinking about society, and about higher education in particular. Although we can see that earlier societies thought they knew more than they did, our governments, and we ourselves, are still prepared to think our own knowledge to be superior and our own times to be an exception. Universities can bring a sense of reality to that perception, by standing above and beyond their times, and by emphasising the transcendent and intangible values underlying our human existence. In that way they may provide an antidote to the lack of awareness of the incompleteness of our knowledge, and of our inability to make proper use of the knowledge we have. These are distinctive functions which, when realized, contribute to the health of society by providing a positive balance, reality, idealism and a sense of transcendence to the purely material demands, necessities and ambitions that preoccupy society in its day-to-day affairs.

The life of the mind and the free use of the intellect have their own usefulness and dignity, but where will they be found at the level of institutions in society? If one answers this question by saying that universities should be valued in such a way, one will never be able to justify such a view in terms of the limited "admissible discourse" now so common in the western countries. Universities are left with no admissible language in which they might express their own distinctive identity, even if they felt a wish to do so. It is an error to simply regard such changes as no more than changes of perception in society. Rather, they represent a narrowing of horizons and a form of change that excludes possibilities, and whose implications have yet to be realized. It may not be too much even to say that the changes in attitudes to universities impend a serious intellectual and human diminution, if not a collapse.

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Rodney Nillsen
School of Mathematics and Applied Statistics
University of Wollongong
Wollongong, New South Wales 2522
AUSTRALIA
email: nillsen@uow.edu.au
web page: http://uow.edu.au/∼nillsen