

# Universities need to find their own voice

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At a meeting of Senate some years ago, there was discussion about the language used in the report of a Working Party whose report had been brought to Senate. In the discussion, it was said “in Australia and the UK, a certain type of language has been forced upon universities”. The implication seemed to be that universities had no choice but to use the language the Government wanted universities to use. Consider also the comments made by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, as reported in *The Australian Higher Education Supplement* (HES) of 24th September 2008:

University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis ... told the HES 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].

While there has been some open dissent at senior levels in the sector, it has been

infrequent and usually limited in scope. But the issue here is not dissent for the sake of dissenting, it’s a question of restoring the legitimate voice of the universities in influencing government policy and actually being listened to. Within universities, this needs to occur at the senior executive levels, the institutional level and the level of academic staff. In so far as staff are concerned, their voice also needs to be heard more *within* their universities, because the universities themselves have copied and mimicked the behaviour of the government, within their own immediate environment.

Of course, this is not simply a challenge for the universities—it is a challenge to the Government to get its policy formulation working on a broader basis, a more informed basis, and a basis of mutual respect. It’s a difficulty that the Government is, however, not really accountable to anybody for what it does in relation to higher education policy.

Government attitudes have been that universities have no legitimate room in which to determine their own agenda—their only legitimate rôle is seen to be what is determined by government, business and external “stakeholders”. There is a lack of respect for universities and their work,

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bordering in my view on an underlying attitude of contempt. The last 20 years have been a tale of ever increasing control, and ever increasing micro-management of universities by indirect and procedural means. The rationale for accepting this by universities has been that they have no choice and, in any case, advantages will accrue to those institutions that do what the government wants more quickly than others. The trend potentially still has a long way to go.

Government policy discussion takes place in an historical vacuum. This gives it an air of superficiality and triviality. As Noel Pearson comments in his recent essay *Radical Hope: education and equality in Australia* (Quarterly essay, issue 35, 2009):

The only history that is remembered is that which might serve a current purpose: it is as though the rest never happened. . . . Sure there is the usual summary at the start of a policy document that touches on the history of an issue—but this is not memory in its true and useful sense . . . The problem with memory is that it may entail . . . doubt, self-awareness and moral responsibility. These are not usual or desired qualities in public administration.

Although Pearson is primarily thinking of aboriginal education issues, his comments aptly describe a marked tendency in the higher education policy area.

As well, the language used in universities and government so often numbs the mind, induces conformity, and blocks out alternative ways of thinking about the uni-

versities and what they have to offer society. It treats the language as merely an instrument for policy, and as a tool for the manipulation of those who are the objects of that policy (and “objects”, not people, is the right word to use here). The resulting logical and conceptual muddle greatly adds to the obfuscation and confusion in discussion about higher education issues.

In *The Australian's* HES of November 4th 2009, Luke Slattery commented on the inability of Australian university leaders to talk about “. . . the importance of higher education moored in a sense of public purpose and moral seriousness”. He quotes from an address by the President of Harvard University, Drew Faust:

As a nation we need to ask more than this [purely utilitarian outputs] from our universities. Higher learning can offer societies a depth and breadth of vision absent from the the inevitably myopic present. Human beings need meaning, understanding and perspective as well as jobs. The question should not be whether we can afford to believe in such purposes in these times but whether we can afford not to.

We need to think about the purpose of Universities, and make sure that we have a language and thinking to express the higher ideals that should be a part of University education. Universities should be *challenging* society in a positive way, not simply *acquiescing* in society. There should be a strong element of *idealism* in our conception of the University's role, not a mere pragmatism that continually seeks its own short-term advantage and is

only concerned with quantifiable ends. In teaching, universities should be trying to develop the latent idealism of our students. Without the above, there is no reason for universities to exist.

Universities have to be and should be multi-objective organizations, but if universities are to have any sort of distinctiveness as institutions within society, it must be because they have a differing set of values and differing purposes from the rest of society. What we are seeing is an erosion of such an awareness.

The creation of TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency) and the possible push to introduce uniform standards raises a huge question mark, as it could lead to universities having a common curriculum, with a further loss of voice and a boring uniformity.

The way governments in Australia have thought about universities in Australia over the last 20 years has been very limited. They have not seen universities as being institutions that can contribute to society by providing a different set of values that both challenge and complement the rest of society, balancing and enriching that society. They have seen society as a mechanism, in which all the parts follow and contribute to a a limited range of government-determined purposes, not as a complex organism in which a genuine diversity of different parts with different values contribute to the overall functioning of society. Of course, it is in its intellectual and cultural aspects, that universities potentially have a very important, distinctive, role to play. But this is not to say that universities are, or should be, restricted to those aspects—rather, it is to

say that they should play a far more significant rôle than they have over the past 20 years.

In their paper *What are universities for?*, for the League of European Research Universities, Geoffrey Bolton and Colin Lucas express the challenge as follows.

The challenge for universities is to articulate clearly what they stand for, speak truth to authority and be steadfast in upholding their freedom and autonomy as crucial values to safeguard societies' future.

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