

# Higher Education for Community and Citizenship?

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## Introduction

Reforms to higher education in Australian universities since the 1980s have resulted in changes to the way universities are funded and the way students access universities. However, these changes have brought about shifts much more significant and profound than were anticipated by the architects. Taken together, the major reforms over the last fifteen years represent a re-making of universities, what they represent, the values they imbue in students, and their contribution to the wider community. A major side effect of these changes has been on the valuing and delivery of citizenship values through university education. While universities have increasingly focussed on the development of vocational skills in students and disregarded traditional academic values, businesses lament the loss of citizenship values in their employees. It is argued in this paper that the advent of the “new” university conceptualises education as a commodity to be purchased by individuals, thus fundamentally changing the way students engage with their education, as well as changing the notion of the university as a public good.

## Higher Education Reforms

The past twenty years has seen significant reforms in Australia’s higher education system relating to both research and teaching approaches. Significant milestones in the debate and reform agenda include the 1988 Dawkins reforms, the 1997-1998 West Review (*Learning for Life*), David Kemp’s 1999 research policy statement *Knowledge and Innovation*, the 2001 Federal Senate Inquiry *Universities in Crisis*, and most recently, the 2002-2003 *Crossroads Review of Higher Education* leading to the *Backing Australia’s Future* reforms (BAF). A convergence of policy reforms in the industrialised world include corporatisation of universities, the casualisation of academic labour, and the implementation of user-pays policies regarding access to higher education (Bostock 2002). Taken together, these reform packages herald the arrival of what is variously called the enterprise university (Marginson and Considine 2000), University Inc (Henry 1999), or Hire Education (Lowe 2004).

The last fifteen years, in particular, have been characterised by significant and far-reaching reforms that have changed the way in which universities are managed, funded and conceived. The two most important sets of reforms concern the internationalisation of universities, and the entrenchment of managerialism as the preferred mode of institutional governance – these have had the most far-reaching consequences.

Important changes stemming from the Dawkins reforms in funding in the late-1980s led to user-pays places for international students (rather than scholarship places as “aid”) and the beginning of the commercialisation of Australian higher education (Harman 2004). The Jackson report of 1984 saw higher education having the potential for a significant export industry (Jackson 1984). Internationalisation has been the main route to commercialisation: “In essence, internationalization is a process of integrating international or inter-cultural dimensions into teaching, research and service functions of higher education institutions”(Harman 2004: 103). Internationalisation has been a significant focus of the most recent reforms through changes to curriculum offerings but most importantly through the “export” of educational services through both the enrolment of international students at local Australian universities and through offshore enrolments. Offshore enrolments seem sure to boom with the establishment of satellite campuses by a number of universities<sup>1</sup> and through the advent of electronic delivery of courses via the Internet. Internationalisation, as a way of supplementing the revenues of

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<sup>1</sup> Including Monash University, and RMIT University.

universities, has become essential given the declining public investment by successive federal governments.

Australia experienced rapid growth of just over 400% in participation from international students between 1995 and 2002 (Marginson 2003). In 2002, the combined number of international students studying in an Australian University was 185 000 representing the third highest “export” of education in the world, representing approximately 21% of total student enrolments, with the five largest enrolment institutions having in excess of 30% international students (Harman 2004). This export represents a significant contribution to the economy and is its fourth most important export (Nelson 2002), with Australia experiencing the highest enrolled proportion of international students of any OECD country (OECD 1999). Currently, 18% of total university income is sourced from the export of higher education (Nelson 2002).

The growth in universities’ earning potential through higher education export, as well as continual government-imposed quality assurance exercises coupled with internally sanctioned efficiency measures, has seen the development of a culture of managerialism. The popularity of managerialism in Australian universities has occurred along side neo-liberal reforms in other sectors of the community. The reasoning behind this trend has been two-fold: universities need to operate as businesses that model themselves on the corporate world to compete against other Australian or international universities, and that entrepreneurship is a requirement in the face of successive cuts to government funding in real terms. These reforms, particularly to industrial relations and employment, were desirable given the needs for flexibility in teaching and research delivery to meet changing student demands (Davis 1997).

*Backing Australia’s Future* represents the most recent package of reforms in this area. This reform package, in particular, emphasised the need to change from collegial governance structures toward corporate governance structures within universities. The acceptance of the BAF reforms by the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (AVCC) has been widely criticised as failing to consider the long-term interests of universities and highlights the vulnerability of all Australian universities and their management created by under-investment from public sources (Clark 2004).

The consequences of managerialism have been significant. The “... substitution of top-down managerial authority for reasoned debate ... has deleterious effects on the creation and maintenance of an ambience conducive to teaching and research through collaborative enterprise often called “collegiality”” (Bostock 2002: 27). Collegial governance represents not just a long standing tradition in universities, but also the recognition that important decisions in university governance should be *made by* academics, not just *in consultation* with them. The decline of this tradition can be seen in the increasing prevalence of outside, corporate representatives in university governance, the re-creation of Vice-Chancellors as CEO, through to the culture of fear and bullying managerialism during the reign of David Robinson as Vice-Chancellor at Monash University (Rodan 2004). For many, the implications throughout Australian universities for collegiality and academic freedom go right to the heart of what the university *is*.

Declining real investment from the public sector in Australian universities since the earlier Dawkins reforms (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee 2001) has placed significant pressure on traditional systems of employment and tenure, seen as critical to academic freedom. Industrial reforms and the emphasis on flexibility in course offerings and delivery have led to increasing casualisation in higher education (Marginson 2000; Bostock 2002) – essentially creating a peripheral academic workforce without the protection of tenure; this trend seriously calls into question the possibility of academic freedom for many higher education workers.

The other ramification of declining real investment has been the implementation of a user pays approach to higher education. The slow creep of user pays from the first introduction of a flat undifferentiated Higher Education Contribution Supplement (HECS) charge per unit through to the introduction of full fee places for domestic students unable to enter through tertiary entrance schemes sends only one message to the customers of the university - competitive academic process is now superseded – the place you want is for sale. Consequently, “[e]ducation is no longer a public investment in our national capacity but a private investment in earning capacity” (Lowe 2004: 33). The BAF reforms, allowing universities to charge up to 25% over the set HECS fee for their courses, the differentiated costs for courses, and the differences in full fee paying courses for both domestic and international students has created a national competitive market in education, as well as putting Australian universities in direct competition with international universities for the much needed revenue generated by fee paying students (Marginson 2003).

Two key characteristics stand out from this range of reforms as being pivotal in understanding the transition from the “old” to the “new” university: the corporatisation of the university; and the commodification of education. Both of these pivotal reforms have significant ramifications for community beliefs about the role of the university in society, and for university education.

### **The Role of Universities and Academic Values**

In this paper, the specific focus is on the implications of the reform agenda for universities and its subsequent impact on the type of education students are receiving, as well as how it affects the values promoted within that educational experience.

While it can be argued that Australia has never embraced the “ideal of ‘education for its own sake’” (Sinclair-Jones 1996:188), higher education policy, and the wider community endorsed the value of a liberal education. Education was acknowledged as a public good contributing much to society, and the knowledge economy Australia desires to be (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee 2001). The role these skills have in developing business and political leadership has always been recognised (Sinclair-Jones 1996). Universities in the broad liberal tradition were seen to contribute intellectual guidance on important public debates. Thus, universities are “seen as essential to both continued scientific and material progress and the protection and promotion of the ‘civil society’ that is an essential feature of democratic societies” (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee 2001: 17). Despite specialist and highly vocational courses, Australian universities retained courses and programs that taught generic liberal education skills such as critical thinking. However, increasing course rationalisation has led to the decline of generalist courses and skills in universities.

Why have the very skills required by citizens of the new knowledge based society been throw out the window by universities? One clue might be found in the rise of the “new managerialism” (Davis 1997) in the public sector, which has driven the rise of the “Enterprise University” (Marginson and Considine 2000). Indeed, elsewhere (Hammer et al 2004) we have argued that increasing plagiarism in universities could be attributed to a rising instrumentalism in universities, reflecting broader social trends, where students are increasingly focused on what a degree can give them materially, instead of the learning process. This outcomes focus replicates a broader trend within the public sector, which values measurable outcomes over other less tangible goods. Marginson and Considine (2000) argue that universities appear to be losing their identity because of an increasing gap between academic culture and university management (Zamorski 2003).

However, combined implications of changes to higher education in Australia, and the evolving “new” university reach much further than the classroom. Some commentators have warned of the arrival of *Hire Education* (Lowe 2004). The transformation of the university and education into another commodity to be sold, and of students into customers, presents fundamental challenges for the traditional pedagogical understandings of education and the role of the university. The introduction of user pays principles encourages the view that education is simply something to be “purchased” rather than something to be “earned” through merit and hard work. While the full ramifications of these changes cannot yet be realised, it is obvious that students/customers already have their eye on their value for money. One University of Queensland full fee paying medical student sued the university when he was failed, despite several reviews of his work; he argued simply that the *academics* had the wrong answers (Livingstone 2004a; Livingstone 2004b).

In the language of the Senate review – Australian higher education is characterised by a number of, perhaps irreconcilable, tensions. The emphasis on user-pays highlights education as a “private benefit” available to individuals who can afford to “purchase” it, rather than as a public good for the community which individuals earn. Students have become re-conceived as consumers whose satisfaction must be guaranteed. This in turn places significant pressure on traditional academic values such as collegiality, excellence, community engagement, inclusivity, academic freedom and broad critical training. Instead, these values are slowly being eroded by corporate managerialism, pragmatism, responsibility only to one’s interests, limits on academic freedom and self-censorship, and the closing of broad critical faculties in preference for focussed, vocational or specialised, income generating streams. These changes quite clearly have implications for the identity of universities, and how students relate to them.

### **Universities as Vocational Institutions**

Those concerned about recent trends in higher education point towards the increasingly vocational focus in universities – however, this vocationalism is not what businesses argue they require of their employees. With the increasing link between employability and university degrees “most students have an expectation that the university experience will be fulfilling from at least an employment-readiness perspective” (Bartley, 2002). However, recent evidence in Australia, and elsewhere, suggests that universities are not fulfilling their new role as vocational institutions. This has ramifications, not just for the employability of students but also in terms of their ability to act as good citizens.

In Australia, banks and government departments have imposed a skills test on graduates entering their organizations, arguing that basic skills such as literacy and numeracy are seriously inadequate. The Australian Chamber of Commerce argues that “[e]mployers want graduates who can communicate, work as a team (and) solve problems” (Balzary cited in Maiden 2004: Online). In response, the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) is putting together a test that assesses students on “critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal understanding and written communication” (Masters cited in Maiden 2004: Online). Universities are already well placed to teach, and assess, students on such skills but according to business, this is not occurring. Yet this failing is not confined to Australian universities.

A recent London Business School survey, which interviewed over 100 executives across 20 countries, found that respondents did not believe they were well served by university-based business programmes. Rather than requiring that universities teach better technical skills, respondents argued that what they required were “more thoughtful, more aware, more sensitive, more flexible, more adaptive managers, capable of being moulded and developed into global executives”(Tyson cited in Cooper 2004: 23). Broadly speaking, according to this survey,

what business requires is “a change in focus from technical knowledge to development of skills in people management, decision-making and cultural sensitivity” (Cooper 2004: 23).

These graduate failings not only cast doubts on the ability of universities to deliver vocational outcomes for graduates, they may also impact on students' ability to engage in the civic sphere. For example, technically educated but culturally illiterate graduates are ill equipped to contribute in a positive way in what is, beyond doubt, a culturally pluralistic liberal democracy such as Australia. Neither do technical skills equip students with the necessary communicative and critical skills that are so invaluable to the socially and politically engaged citizen. By contrast, as one graduate of the much-maligned BA asserts, “I can argue my way out of a paper bag. It may take me seven years of procrastination, but I can do it” (Sands 2004: Online). Faith Sands can also, “criticise, and communicate [her] ideas logically, skills in which, she claims, some people fail to see the value” (2004: Online). Paradoxically, “some people” are not business leaders but perhaps universities themselves. Perhaps the original drive towards employment and vocational outcomes blinded universities to value of their traditional focus to community life. Yet other trends, such as the increasing emphasis on user pays may have a negative impact on the ability of universities to contribute towards the making of good citizens.

A recent American study tested the work of P. J. Gumport, who argued that “different conceptions of higher education may have important consequences for students and society” (Persell & Wenglinsky 2004: 337). Gumport claimed that over the past 25 years, higher education had become a commercial rather than a social institution. Persell and Wenglinsky's study tested the thesis that students of for-profit education colleges were less civic than those who attended public institutions. Their report supported the thesis, confirming that “students attending for-profit schools were less likely to vote, less likely to participate in political activities other than voting, and less likely to become involved with their communities” (Persell & Wenglinsky 2004: 351). Tying the impact of user-pays to the emphasis on vocational outcomes over knowledge for knowledge's sake, one important unintended consequence may be the reduced capacity for universities to positively contribute to the valuable task of producing good citizens. This should be cause for concern, since as Robert Putnam and others contend, there appears to be a general social trend towards declining civic activism (Putnam 1993; Latham 1998). Some contend (Whiteley 2003) that instead of overall decline, civic activism is taking on a more individualistic flavour. However, even if this is the case the decline in collectivism that this entails should still be cause for concern.

### **Challenges for Australian Higher Education**

Therefore, concerned scholars must target university management and government, arguing that traditional university values and pedagogy are of value not just in the creation of good citizens but also in the creation of appropriately skilled employees for the knowledge economy. Business needs good citizens. Campaigns that insist on the value of a traditional university education need not reject valuable additions that have been made to the curriculum in the name of vocationalism; internships and practical experience offer valuable opportunities for students to develop people skills such as good communication and problem solving.

As well as engaging with university management academic staff could play a far more active role in the promotion of internal scholarly values amongst students. In a society increasingly dominated by the market, this will necessarily involve a clear articulation of such values; scholars can no longer assume that students know what universities are about, particularly if one considers that the majority of students attend university to attain material outcome rather than knowledge itself.

For universities to continue to be a public, rather than a private good, these points must be pursued. Based on the logic of government provision, there is no reason for governments to continue funding institutions that produce only individual, private goods.

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