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REVIEW ARTICLE

Australian Universities in Crisis

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Why Universities Matter

Tony Coady (Ed.)

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ABSTRACT *That this book, having been recommended for publication by the editors of Melbourne University Press, was subsequently rejected through the intervention of the University authorities, is a symptom of the very malaise which the contributors address. Since the Dawkins 'reforms' to Australian higher education the university system has come under increasing surveillance by government functionaries, and university 'managements' have been subverted through their desire to win favour from government and to display their 'competitive edge' against other 'institutions'. The 'reforms' have mandated the wholesale introduction of business techniques, and a pervading business ethos, which is quite inappropriate to the traditional function of universities. The very word 'traditional' is rejected as contrary to the commitment to change required of expanding businesses. That universities have a role in conserving and transmitting a public culture is all but repudiated by university managements in their desire to appear at the 'cutting edge' of government privatization agenda. The authors of this book affirm a public role for universities, and reassert the conviction that they must protect a threatened independence in the search for truth, and in the responsibility to 'speak truth to power'. Since 'managements' are now unlikely to uphold these duties, it becomes the responsibility of the members of the community of scholars to maintain independence of thought and to expound the truth.*

Clearly the contributors to this volume believe that many people think universities don't matter, and even those who think they do often misunderstand their purpose. Whatever the reason, the Australian university system is in deep crisis. Much of the trouble rests with strained relations between universities and government, resulting in a reflex strain within the universities themselves, particularly between their staff and 'management'.

One author is prepared to be very specific about blame; John Molony says bluntly that the universities were betrayed by the Hawke Government, 'but the Prime Minister, in an entirely craven way, took no responsibility' (p. 81). The buck passed to John Dawkins, who headed a ministry which sandwiched education in between employment and training. There were good reasons for some changes at the time of the Dawkins 'revolution'. After a mission to Western Europe a trade-union delegation, in their report *Australia Reconstructed*, deplored Australia's 'deficient skill base' as a cause of poor national economic performance, and recommended closer ties between educational institutions and the labour market. Ironically, the reforms eventuated in the wholesale adoption of business practices within the universities, practices such as were usually vigorously

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opposed by the labour movement. Secondly, it was clear that several higher-education institutions, which were not funded publicly as universities, were appointing staff capable of high-level research, and it was unfair that their research should not be encouraged with public funds. The Dawkins response was radical, resulting in the initial blurring of all distinctions between the institutions through the creation of a Unified National System. The word 'national' sounded alarm bells for some observers (p. 79), especially when 'national objectives' came to be priorities for university planning—a direct transplantation of partisan political objectives in order to recruit the whole system for political advantage to the government. The reform sought to legislate small 'institutions' out of existence, and to force amalgamations through a series of shotgun weddings on the dubious philosophy that big is better. The bureaucratic adoption of the term 'institution' seemed calculated to strip away whatever mystique and particular ideals were associated with the word 'university'.

To emphasize the link between higher education 'training' and the workforce, Hawke adopted the slogan 'the clever country', which he apparently hoped would catch on as well as Donald Horne's 'the lucky country'. It was typical of this government that they would fail to appreciate the nuance of sharp-practice implicit in 'clever', as though new graduates would be as foxy as poker-players, an apt analogy since all interested parties had become 'stake-holders' in the education system. There was a deep paradox in the intent of the reform. It was swathed in the language of deregulation, free enterprise and competition, and yet the unified system signalled an unprecedented measure of government control through the demand for output measures and benchmarking of standards. With suitably savage imagery Dawkins introduced a 'claw-back' of university funds so that the government could exercise more direct control of the output of research through centrally administered funds, correctly labelled by Judith Brett as part of 'the neo-liberal agenda' (p. 144). All research had to redound to the national interest, and projects deemed too esoteric were subject to public ridicule in the national parliament. As Peter Karmel laments, direct political control was tightened by the abolition in 1987 of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, thereby removing both a buffer between the government and the system and destroying the collective memory of educational values stored up in the Commission (p. 183). Seumas Miller makes it plain that 'the use of control at a distance by administrative mechanisms, such as those which ensure that research funds provided to publicly-funded universities are for government-specified purposes only, is inconsistent with institutional autonomy …' The subsequent imposition of enterprise bargaining is a further example of control at a distance 'which devolves responsibility while maintaining control of funding' (p. 125).

Successive governments have shown a much greater interest in output statistics than in the quality of education. The pressure both to admit larger numbers of students and to produce more and more graduates clearly implies a weakening of standards, or what some would call 'grade inflation' and degree devaluation. This process is accelerated by the adoption of 'quality' measures such as wholesale student evaluations which determined in effect whether teachers were popular and whether subject materials were too hard. Some surveys even absurdly asked students to evaluate whether what they were being taught was at 'the cutting edge of the discipline'. There is no avoiding the fact that when such evaluations are made criteria for appointment, tenure and promotion there is strong pressure on teachers to dilute the intellectual effort required on the part of the student to succeed, with an inevitable deterioration in the actual quality of the education provided—another of the many paradoxes in the new system, since this control is applied in the name of 'quality'. Then again, under the new dispensation students are no longer 'students' but are now 'clients' receiving a service or, worse still, 'customers' and

'consumers' of educational 'products'. This severance of the student from *studium*, the passion for learning through rigorous effort, is one of the tragedies which is rapidly making the 'clever country' one of the dumbest places in the developed world.

While the surge towards equal opportunity for more and more students was commendable, it did not sit well with the rhetoric of 'excellence'. Tony Klein asks 'must we then reduce the quality of education to the lowest common denominator?' (p. 101). Two pincer-like pressures put a lethal stress upon the (let us say) 'core' disciplines on which true university education was founded: the overwhelming urge to prepare for a well-paid job encourages students to bypass some rigorously intellectual subjects for more 'useful' studies and, while often the 'useful' subjects are intellectually less demanding, they loom as doubly attractive. So where in many places philosophy, maths, physics, chemistry, classics and history struggle to enrol enough students, university administrations seem only too willing to phase them out.

A big reform programme obviously implied change, but no one could have anticipated how far change would become a fetish among managers. At successive conferences, one for the Australian Deans of Arts and the other an AVCC training programme for university managers, I heard one of the prominent Vice-Chancellors featured in this book give the same address with the central theme: 'you must believe in change'. His big challenge was: 'If you don't believe in change, go home and resign your position tomorrow'. People in both audiences looked at each other in puzzlement: change to what? To what purpose? For what reason? It was extraordinary that change was promoted entirely for its own sake, without any specific benefit being offered. The only fair inference one could draw was that whatever you have at the moment is wrong. Any democratic theorist could gladly endorse the proposition that human institutions are subject to improvement, but one usually has something in mind as to what in particular is wrong and just what change might be an improvement. One does not have to be especially conservative, however, to know that institutions usually carry forward valuable experiences from the past, and fewer do this more effectively than the universities as conservators of knowledge. Then one is merely talking about *traditional* universities and, as we shall see, managers seem to have a strong antipathy toward 'traditional universities'. Tony Coady here cautions about 'some primitive "progressivism" whereby all change is "reform" and all novelties improvements' (p. 3). As Raymond Gaita avers, 'It is not, however, as the rhetoric of the corporate university tries to seduce us into believing, a truth written in the heavens that universities should change with the times' (p. 42). He then points out the profound danger of 'progressivism' as applied to students' programmes: 'Students who self-consciously speak of their studies in the language of the 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' (*ibid.*).

The deterioration in the vocabulary of the official university is one of the tragedies of our present turbulence. The sign of uncertain times for Thucydides was when words changed their meanings (Thuc. 3. 82). The problem was similar for Thomas Hobbes, writing at the height of the English Civil War: no one could fix any agreed meaning to the terms people used, and so a lax moral relativism seeped into all relationships. The contributors to this collection like to borrow Orwell's Newspeak for this phenomenon in university management. Much of the new vocabulary, and one must in the context call it corrupt, is stolen from the business world. At one of those management 'training' sessions I heard a worthy exhorting us: 'Whether you like it or not, the university is a business', with the implication that it must adopt business methods. Universities have

adopted with alacrity the language of 'benchmarking', 'world's best practice', 'total quality assurance' and 'core business', while students have become 'clients' or 'customers' and other friends of the university are 'stakeholders'. We had to devise 'mission statements' with the word 'excellence' in them, we had to define our 'outreach' and compose 'strategic plans' for future development. We could scarcely tell whether the university had become a church or an army, but it was hardly recognizable as a university. Not being content with being managers, we all had to become 'line managers'.

Coady relates the chilling example of the engineers who said that the *Challenger* space shuttle was not yet safe for travel, but since political expediency required a spectacular example of success, professional caution was thrown to the winds; the engineers were told to think like managers, not like engineers, which they duly did, with tragic results. Coady notes 'the stark opposition between managing and engineering, an opposition that treats management as a practice independent of what is being managed' (p. 16). After we had been through all the tortuous training programmes of 'total quality management', and having had the world-wide consistency of McDonalds hamburgers thrown up as the model, we were sent to listen to a new managing consultant who said that total quality management was now 'out', a passing fad, a thing consigned to the dustbin of the business world, which had now turned to project management. Courses have become 'products', and study materials have become 'courseware'. The McDonalds analogy makes more understandable a Vice-Chancellor's claim to have established a 'retail-outlet' university, with 'courseware' retailed by 'counter staff' (p. 19). No word has been more abused than 'excellence', which is hammered to all the mastheads of university propaganda while government cuts and the new managerial arrangements conspire to dilute the genuine excellence universities once had. Hazel Rowley is quoted to telling effect: 'never before [has there been] so much talk of "excellence and quality assurance" and never before [has there been] so little concern for either' (p. 41).

Peter Karmel, who of all the contributors is best qualified to understand the position of university managements, points out the flaws in the quality assurance exercise: 'There was no clear conceptualisation of what was meant by quality in the university context and many of the performance indicators were of dubious validity' (p. 164). As one appointed to serve on a QA panel visiting other universities, I can confirm that the whole exercise was confined to processes, much more concerned with who had read the university policy documents than with what people actually did in their daily work. Whenever I asked university members what their research was about, the discussion was firmly channelled by the chair back to the policy documents.

The corruption of the university's vocabulary has been almost lethal to the main purpose of the university, the quest for truth. Raymond Gaita, Seumas Miller and Tony Klein all give compelling cases for seeing the university as that institution which is specially suited to the independent quest for understanding and learning, where scholars seek the truth wherever it may lead. Yet universities have become more characterized by mendacity than truth-speaking (p. 36). The boastful propaganda of the University of Melbourne, in seeking to build a reputation as a world leader, is roundly criticized by Judith Brett (p. 148), but all universities are complicit in the inflation of the value of the system. Coady ominously points out that the more universities strive to produce public measures of their excellence, the more governments can claim the success of their reforms, justifying their funding cuts which, they say, obviously have raised, rather than damaged, the quality of the universities (p. 21). Boasts about the excellence of current universities rarely mention the disastrous run-down of university library resources, the blow-out in student–staff ratios, the increase in administrative tasks imposed on all staff

by government policies, the squeeze on research time and the control or censure of research programmes, the deterioration of university salaries for all but managers and the break-down of working conditions. Karmel is bemused by the failure of the Vice-Chancellors to raise the issue of government supplementation of salary increases, 'an extraordinary omission' (p. 168).

In a most interesting contribution Simon Marginson and Stuart McIntyre remind us that the universities are civic institutions with responsibilities not only to their own internal communities and the government of the day, but also to the wider community as a whole, regardless of the political currents flowing at any one time. It is significant that the original universities were established at the same time as the colonies were seeking to establish responsible government (p. 53). The intention was clearly to help build an informed and enquiring populace who would be capable of taking charge of their own affairs. That they should practise an internal democracy as an example was one aspect of their democratic role, not at all helped under present circumstances by top-down management (p. 20). Quite apart from this, in a plural society the existence of independent institutions is one important barometer of the democratic climate, and the recent subjection of the university system to direct government control represents a severe undermining of the democratic qualities of our community.

Some earlier evaluations understood the true functions of universities very well. The famous Murray Report commissioned under the Menzies Government, sought to produce large numbers of highly educated men and women for the good of Australia as a whole. Far from focusing on narrowly trained economic human resources, it aimed at providing a 'breadth of education' to produce 'rounded human beings'. 'As "guardians of intellectual standards and intellectual integrity" ' it was the universities' 'duty "to seek the truth and make it known". Hence the committee was "confident that no Australian Government will seek to deny them their full and free independence in carrying out their proper functions as universities" ' (pp. 62–63). The writers of the Murray Report could not have foreseen how far the adoption of 'user pays' by Dawkins and his successors would betray the community interest in having an educated public. One of the proper functions of universities, as Miller affirms with Edward Said, is 'to speak truth to power' (p. 123).

Unfortunately, this volume presents a catalogue of instances when universities have not at all been pleased about people speaking truth to power. While in earlier times the universities did not always live up to the aspirations of the Murray Committee, as in the cases of Russel Ward, Max Crawford and S.S. Orr (pp. 64–65), more recent denials of academic freedom seem to be the direct outcome of the new managerialism. For example, when Victoria University of Technology spent $100,000 on a box at the Docklands Stadium it was no doubt proving itself to be a good corporate citizen. Yet that money could not then be spent on teaching and research, but when Allen Patience pointed out this obvious fact via the University's e-mail system, his e-mail privileges were withdrawn. The very respected Monash historian, Emeritus Professor J.D. Legge, a former Dean and nationally known broadcaster was threatened by the Vice-Chancellor of Monash University with loss of his room for taking part in a meeting called to discuss funding cuts, after the Vice-Chancellor had attempted to suppress the meeting by ordering the venue to be locked. At the University of New South Wales a law lecturer, Dr Cathy Sherry, wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in criticism of the Government's position on native title. The federal MP Wilson Tuckey contacted the Vice-Chancellor in complaint, and presumably this was passed on to her, though the author, Morag Fraser, does not make this quite plain (pp. 144–147). Her account, however, is mainly addressed to the celebrated case of the suppression of this book itself by the University

of Melbourne, an astonishing instance of the stricture of academic freedom. Professor Coady originally had the book favourably received by the editors of Melbourne University Press, with whom he had a continuing editorial role. Apparently on instruction from the University management, the book was eventually declined on the grounds that it was only conference papers and not really research, that it said nothing new, and that it favoured the 'traditional' view of the university without providing 'balance' in favour of the new style of university management. The Vice-Chancellor vigorously defended the rejection of the book before the University's Academic Board. The incident is shocking in general terms for its wish to gag senior members of the University, but it is especially disappointing in the extent to which Melbourne University's managers had entirely repudiated the concept of the 'traditional' university.

The writers of this book put forward an overwhelming case for the upholding of time-honoured university ideals, and show that their defence was never more urgent a need than as now. One could recommend this book as a handbook for academics dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of learning and research, and would hope to see them clasping their copies as they traipsed to their next Faculty or Board meetings. As John Molony lamented, it is not only a tragedy, but also a scandal, that academics have been 'supine' (p. 82) in the face of the erosion of the ideals associated with the universities, which have now been taken hostage by the business world. The business world has its place, and its norms may be necessary for a market-oriented community, but they are not those of the university.