

## **'Building a University in the 1990s'**

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To make any sense of the shape and texture of the Australian higher education system in the 1990s we need to go back much further than the 1980s. The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the most turbulent of all for Australia's universities, but the source of that turbulence did not lie mostly in the actions of unthinking governments or negligent vice-chancellors. Three broad changes in Australian society in the second half of the century intersected in the late 1980s to produce a time of upheaval in higher education. The first of these changes was a steady increase in the numbers of people seeking education at the post-secondary level. The second was a consequent change in the general conception of what higher education was. The third was a change in the extent to which Australian society was prepared to tax itself to do things through the public sector. In 1950 there were little more than 30,000 students in higher education in a population of 8 million or so. By the end of the century there were around 700,000 students in a population of 18 million. This astonishing increase (matched in much of the developed world) itself had three causes: a high postwar birthrate, a great increase in the demand for people with knowledge-based skill and the 'outsourcing' of training by the professions from the workplace to higher education institutions. The institutional forms and structures devised to accommodate this sustained increase in demand underwent progressive change. Finally, Australian state and federal governments found that the cost of higher education kept growing inconveniently, and from the late 1950s tried different methods to deal with the funding of growth. None of them was successful for long.

The intersection point of these broad changes was the late 1980s, and for a political reason. In July 1987 the newly re-elected Hawke Labor Government dealt with the complexity of traditional administrative arrangements by establishing a two-tier system of Cabinet government, with senior and junior Ministers for a set of 16 major portfolios. Education, training and research became the responsibility of a 'mega-department' named Employment, Education and Training (DEET), whose Minister was a strong, self-confident and reforming Western Australian, John

Dawkins. All the existing administrative and advisory arrangements for these domains themselves had to be changed, since responsibilities which had once been in separate Departments were now united. The new Minister thus had an unusual degree of freedom in action.

He had a number of important and urgent matters to deal with at once. The binary system of higher education, in which 'universities' were funded for research but 'colleges' (of advanced education) were not, was an egregious anomaly, about to explode because several state governments were planning to rename some of their colleges as universities. There was an urgent need for more money to be pumped into the system, but as a former Finance Minister Dawkins knew that it was impossible to provide the needed funds unless students accepted some of the cost of their own education. The arrangements for supporting research in higher education were antiquated, uncoordinated, and poorly funded. All these responsibilities were now within his Department, and he had a useful report on his table showing him a way forward. Finally, he had to set up a new advisory system, for two reasons. First, universities and colleges were essentially autonomous bodies established by acts of parliaments, and second, his own Department did not and could not have all the expertise necessary to advise him on the best decision to make in a given instance.

Dawkins acted quickly and decisively. He decided not to use any of the advisory systems that he had inherited, and formed a group of personal advisers from within the system whose views he knew and sympathised with. Very soon afterwards he announced that he would establish a 'National Board for Employment, Education and Training' (NBEET) that would be the official conduit for advice from the sector. The Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, the previous ruler of the system, was dispensed with. He issued first a Green (discussion) and then a White (policy) paper on higher education whose principal effect was the amalgamation of most of the colleges with most of the universities. Within a few years 19 universities and 46 colleges had become 38 universities on 122 campuses in what was called 'the unified national system' of higher education. The binary system was over. The Minister found the needed money for funding as an advance from the public purse but also set up a committee which advised him on how students should contribute to funding through what was to be called the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). He brought together all the research responsibilities of his portfolio, and gave them to a new body called the

Australian Research Council (ARC). To make sure the Council had increased money to discharge its duties he first diverted funds from the operating funds of the universities and then increased its allocations from Treasury.

These actions were themselves examples of great change, and each was to cause further great change. Dawkins was, for a time, an intensely disliked Minister within the sector for which he was responsible. Nonetheless, his changes were appropriate and inevitable, and they have lasted. The Australian Research Council and the HECS, both under great attack in the beginning, were later greatly defended by the sector. Nearly fifteen years later, only his advisory conduit, NBEET, has gone. But there is no great desire, within the sector, to go back to the advisory structures of the past. No one talks today about the unified national system, but its elements remain, and flourish.

One of them is the University of Canberra. In the binary system it had been the Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAЕ), the Commonwealth's only essay in this form and an institution designed to be an example to the states. John Dawkins had wished to merge it with the Australian National University, the other significant higher education presence in the national capital, but had been unsuccessful, despite the fact that both were Commonwealth statutory authorities responsible to him. Neither institution wished to merge, and the ANU was able to use public pressure to block the change in the Senate. Dawkins then decided to make CCAЕ a university in its own right, and it became the University of Canberra (UC) at the very beginning of 1990.

I became the Vice-Chancellor of the University exactly one year later, its first Vice-Chancellor (and former CCAЕ Director), Professor Roger Scott, having been appointed Director-General of Education in Queensland in the middle of 1990. I arrived after ten years in the research funding and science policy business, the last five of them as the Chairman of the Australian Research Grants Committee and then of the Australian Research Council, along with a term on the Australian Science and Technology Council and several other advisory bodies. I had also been a member of John Dawkins's so-called 'purple circle' (a newspaper coinage) and an executive member of NBEET.

My appointment as CEO of a new university, and one that had not been funded for research, seemed to some an indication that UC would go full speed ahead down the research track. In fact ten years of the research

business, and especially of having to persuade Ministers and senior public servants of the need to find money for it, made led to a considerable disenchantment on my part. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of the important of 'pure' research, which I heard all the time, and indeed had pronounced myself, in the beginning, I had come to see 'research' as intimately bound up with the career advancement of individual academics and with the continuing institutional competition for prestige. Neither of those outcomes seemed to me to justify large sums of public money. I also saw research as having distorted the real business of universities, education. I had spoken and written about the need for other paths to honour inside universities other than the research path, and UC seemed to me to be the right kind of environment in which to try some alternatives. I also felt that there was a danger that the newer universities, and the former colleges trapped inside old universities, would all incline toward the 'research is good' model offered by the old universities, which I saw as not only outdated but costly.

Accordingly, I argued that UC should concentrate on what it was good at, which was a blend of high-quality, student-centred teaching and the kind of applied research which industry, government and community organisations want done and will pay for. Furthermore, we should avoid the mad scramble to get bigger, and do our best to get better. Finally, we would use our position in the national capital to become better known nationally and internationally. A smallish, high-quality university in the national capital devoted to these ends had a good chance of coming through the ruck and establishing a long-term and valued identity.

Twelve years later it is only possible to provide an interim report on progress. In 2002 UC is much the same size as it was in 1990 (between 9000 and 10000 students). Its expenditure is over \$100 million, compared with \$53 million in 1990. In the earlier year more than 90 per cent of the University's expenditure came as recurrent funding from the Commonwealth. In 2001 37 per cent came as Commonwealth recurrent funding, 23 per cent from the HECS trust fund (that is, from Australian undergraduate students), and 40 per cent was earned from a great variety of sources, most of them other kinds of teaching, and research. UC's students come from all states and territories, and from 92 countries overseas. Entry standards are high (there is no 'tail' of lower-achieving applicants, and no marginally funded students), and the employment rates and starting salaries of its graduates are at the top of the system. The University teaches overseas

in a dozen cities, in association with foreign university and other partners. It is the headquarters of one of Australia's most highly regarded Co-operative Research Centres, a major partner in a second, and one of a number of universities linked with a third. The University has learned how to develop the good ideas of its staff in a way that profits the staff member as well as the University. UC is the base for three of the system's most interesting endeavours: the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM), the Australian Mathematics Trust, and AGRECON, a university-based company that provides spatial imagery to farms, banks and insurance companies – indeed, to anyone who needs it. Between a fifth and a quarter of UC's students are postgraduates, but only a minority of them are undertaking PhD degrees. The great majority are advancing in their professions by undertaking further professionally relevant degrees and diplomas. It takes a long time to build a first-class university, and there are no universally accepted standards of measurement. But, judged by the standards operating at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the University of Canberra is at least on the way.

There was no inevitability about its progress. It was not at all clear at the beginning of the 1990s how the new unified national system would develop, and the attitude of government was that such a question was essentially one for the universities themselves to provide. The newer creations also had to put up with a kind of lofty disdain from those older, as well as a clamant cry from the oldest (which were eventually to distinguish themselves from the others as 'the Group of Eight') to the effect that they should be given special treatment because they did most of the research. In addition, the unified national system quickly became highly competitive, and competition increased when the Labor Government was replaced by the Coalition in 1996. UC did not seek (and was not invited) to join 'the Australian Technological Network, a loose grouping of the former metropolitan institutes of technology (CCAIE had belonged to an earlier version), when it was created in 199?, and settled down to the realisation that it was on its own and had better get used to it.

The tag that UC 'educates professionals, professionally' arose from the first University representative taskforce set up in 1991 to worry about questions of identity and mission. The tag was adopted quickly within the University and provided a unifying statement that helped direct efforts. Further such taskforces in subsequent years provided similar stimuli in

areas such as the University's physical environment, its administrative systems, its student residences (UC has Australia's largest integrated student residential system) and its international role. A lot of effort went into enhancing the University community, improving its buildings and grounds, developing a welcoming ethos and securing staff, senior and junior, who were in sympathy from the beginning with the University's mission. There was a continuing attempt to build 'collegiality' in the best sense: a thousand staff who understood the University's situation and the options available to it and could discuss with one another how best to achieve commonly shared goals. Very little structural change occurred until 1999, when the University changed quickly and without fuss from a six-Faculty to a three-Division structure. A stable senior management group, a talented body of staff and a strong sense of community were all ingredients that helped to produce good outcomes in what were undeniably stressful times.

Much of the stress was externally generated. One element was frequent change in Ministers and their priorities. John Dawkins gave more attention to technical training when the Labor Government was returned to office in 1990, and became Treasurer in 1991. Higher education became the responsibility of Peter Baldwin, one of the junior Ministers. Baldwin was a good student and had the sense to learn some music before he waved the baton. His major achievement, 'the Quality rounds', had universities scurrying in many directions trying to show how concerned they were for 'quality' in order to achieve high standing and a share of some new money. In 1991 Dawkins was followed by Kim Beazley, who seemed to regard higher education as a great comedown from Defence, where he had served with distinction as Minister for several years. Beazley in turn was replaced by Simon Crean, whose principal contribution, at the end of the Labor Government's term, was first to push universities into an era of 'enterprise bargaining' with the unions, and second to fail to provide them the funds needed to provide overdue salary increases. His Liberal successor, Amanda Vanstone, had the unpleasant task of explaining to universities that they were to lose 6 per cent of their recurrent funding in order to help to fill an alleged budgetary black hole left by the Labor Government. David Kemp, who replaced Senator Vanstone in 1998, was more interested in school education than in the university domain, in which he had spent several years as a professor at Monash University. His attitudes and actions emphasised even further the dictum of

the 1990s that universities were on their own, and should not see the Commonwealth Government as a source of new funding. The Commonwealth, for fifty years the main provider for Australia's universities, as well as the main regulator, was plainly retiring from its first role, and even to a degree its second.

The increasing indifference of governments to the universities presented a problem to the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC) that it could not solve. By and large governments had treated universities generously and respectfully in the postwar period. John Dawkins's interventions, notwithstanding the fact that they were accompanied with substantial new funding, were seen as rude and ignorant. Academic critics of government seemed unable to grasp the point that when most people who make decisions have been educated at university, universities will, for perfectly good reasons, have lost a good deal of their former mystique and authority. Very few undergraduates adopt the view that research is the main reason for the existence of universities, especially when they cannot find a teacher when they need one because that person is undertaking his or her 'real work'. Moreover, the tendency of some academics, especially in the older universities, to speak in ways that indicated not only that they had a high opinion of themselves but they expected the community to share that warm feeling, tended to reduce the general esteem in which universities and their inhabitants were held within an increasingly well-educated Australia. Cabinet discussions about higher education in the 1990s, on both sides of politics, appear not to have been attended with much respect or sympathy for the problems the vice-chancellors were facing.

The over-riding problem for the AVCC was, however, that it did not identify or could not agree on a common cause. It would have to be said that some vice-chancellors, by forming smaller groups within the AVCC and putting that group's interests first, or by telephoning ministers to distance themselves from an AVCC decision, did little to assist any cause other than their own. A long-term sustained attempt to build a base within the Australian community, probably the only strategy that had much chance, foundered on time-scale: it might be seven years before there was a result to show for all the effort and expenditure, and by that time most vice-chancellors would have been replaced. It is also probably true that AVCC leaders had difficulty in separating themselves from the notion that if only they had an opportunity, they could persuade the Minister to do this or that. One vice-

chancellor of the period took the view that he would only speak to the Minister; senior public servants were underlings, and he had his own to correspond with them. Alas, governments of both sides knew that despite the size and importance of higher education, vice-chancellors had no more capacity to mobilise public opinion, let alone votes, than to operate without money.

The combination of enterprise agreements that were obtained only after distressing industrial action, unfunded salary increases and a progressive decline in Commonwealth financial provision made the mid 1990s a very difficult time for all universities. Technological changes provided a new challenge, just at a time when money was scarce. Everyone was working harder in 1995 than had been the case ten years earlier, and by 2002 the pace of work had risen again. It was as though Australia was unable to extricate itself from a treadmill of its own making. At the end of the decade there appeared the demographic spectre. For fifty years Australia's universities had relied first on the results of a rising postwar birthrate and then on increases in participation as the fuel of growth. By 2001 two demographic elements were plain. First, about half the school-leaving cohort would now attend university, and getting the other half there was going to be problematic. In consequence, the group who had missed out on university because of their school results, the 'mature-age' group, would decline. Second, the Australian birthrate was low and getting lower. By about 2010 there might be more university places available than there were students wishing to take them up. It was not hard to imagine thrifty officers in the Department of Finance looking forward to the day when the Commonwealth could actually reduce funding to the universities because of lack of demand. In retrospect, the early decision that UC should concentrate on what it was good at and not try to be all things to all people was a providential one.

And what of students, the universities' true reason for being? The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not a radical time. There was fuss aplenty, but student anger was directed at fees, costs and funding, which was perfectly understandable given what had happened to them over the decade. Not only did they have a HECS debt to worry about, but publicly provided financial assistance for needy students dwindled. Much higher proportions of students found that they simply had to have a part-time job, in order to survive and also 'to maintain a lifestyle', meaning a motor vehicle (public transport also became less generally useful in the decade), money for

entertainment, clothes and non-university activities. They were joined in the search for available and compatible work by scores of thousands of overseas students, who needed the money to pay for fees and accommodation. The university as an institution was losing its place as the social setting for the life of its students.

Nonetheless, the quality of the students as people preparing to enter professional life made me, at least, confident about the future. Today's young people are better rounded, more widely knowledgeable, more articulate and probably more hard-working than my own generation was at the same time. They are being educated in universities which, though less well funded than they ought to be, are more interested in education and more pre-occupied with how to provide it at high levels of quality, than was the case in the 1980s. It is true that some of our students can't spell, and the apostrophe has become a random punctuation mark for many, but they take their work seriously, and they care about the world. The quality of our graduates tells me that the universities are doing pretty well, despite their problems. Before very long a new generation of academic staff will be running things, a generation not nurtured on stories of a golden age when things were good, students were well prepared, research money was easy to get, academics were very well paid and governments knew their place. My guess is that they will make a pretty good fist of it.