

**(for Jane Richardson, HES)**

**My four universities**

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Fifty years ago, around about this time of the year, the Deputy Headmaster of my High School, Jack Williams, came into 3A to ask how many of us were intending to go on to Fourth Year. Which of us, he went on to ask, were proposing to undertake Honours study and hoping to go to University? My hand went up. I was planning to become a high school teacher, like my father and mother. I knew only that I had to go to university to become a high school teacher, and that I needed to undertake a double major in English and History, my best subjects as a student and therefore my likely teaching subjects. What university was like I did not know.

I sat for the Leaving Certificate in 1953 and entered the University of New England in 1954, alphabetic hegemony making me the first student to matriculate into that institution, which gained its autonomy in the year I entered it. As it happened, I never became a high school teacher. Indeed, I never left 'university', save for a few years as a statutory officer in the service of the Commonwealth of Australia, and even then I was on leave from a university. I retire as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra early next year, after a little more than eleven years in that post.

I knew four Australian universities quite well, though of course at different stages of their lives and of mine. What follows is a reflection on the changing nature of universities in Australia over the last fifty years, from my own vantage point. No doubt others may see the same period differently. This is how it seemed to me.

**University of New England, 1954 to 1961**  
**The Production of Young Ladies and Gentlemen**

In retrospect, the amazing thing about UNE was its small size. There were, I think, 56 students in my first year, and our names were read out at the Graduation ceremony, which was also a matriculation ceremony. Our Vice-Chancellor, Dr (later Sir) Robert Madgwick warned us to look at the person on our right, and then at the person

on our left. 'One of you will fail,' he intoned. Just about everyone I know who went to any Australian university at this time remembers that piece of statistical gloominess. It was correct, too. Failure rates were very high, and no one thought to ask why universities accepted students if they were going to fail them. This outcome was especially odd, given that professors set and marked the leaving and matriculation examinations, which were the conduit into university.

None of us thought that we would fail, and a third of us were wrong. Anyway, this was April: exams were a long way away. There were three terms of nine weeks, then stu vac, and then final exams. We settled down enthusiastically into being university students.

UNE was almost completely residential, so we ate together, along with some of the unmarried academic staff, who received free board and lodgings through acting as 'subwardens', as did a few of the senior students and one or two postgraduate students. There were three rules: no guns, no gambling, no dogs. It was quickly plain that we were being schooled in manners and social graces as well as in English, History, Economics and Psychology (my own first year choice). We wore gowns to lectures, and indeed virtually all the time, since gowns added a little warmth (much needed in Armidale) and disguised threadbare, dirty or unironed clothing. Our lecturers addressed us formally as 'Mr' or 'Miss', and we were conspicuous if we missed lectures or especially tutorials, since numbers in our classes were very small.

Most of us had Teachers' College scholarships and were bonded to serve the NSW Education Department for several years after graduating. We would have to undertake a Dip. Ed at Armidale Teachers' College after we had graduated, and every afternoon the bus would bring back to the university these lordly or beautiful graduates once their classes were over. We were well taught by competent and pleasant academics. Most of those who taught me History at UNE went on to hold chairs in Australian universities, though no causal relationship is implied. UNE tried to maintain the gentlemanly style even when the great expansion of the 1950s and 60s caught up with it. Colleges were created, with high tables, too.

I missed that, taking History Honours rather than a Dip.Ed., fluking a Commonwealth Postgraduate Scholarship at the end of that year, and marrying on the strength of it. Many of us married young. I discovered 'research' as a postgraduate student and thoroughly enjoyed it; I also had the great good fortune to be supervised by Russel Ward. I

found that everyone was prepared to help me – I had only to ask – and learned all sorts of useful knacks and tricks of research from right across the university as academic after academic showed me this way or that way of doing things.

**Australian National University, 1961 to 1971  
Research as the Point of Everything**

My MA thesis turned out well, and I moved from History to Political Science and from UNE to ANU for the best of reasons. I needed another scholarship to do a PhD and ANU had its own scholarships, while a political scientist at ANU had examined my MA thesis, on the borderline of the two disciplines. I was invited to join that band, and made most welcome.

ANU was very different to UNE, although both universities were in their weatherboard and fibro phase. It was not until the 1960s that the full range of building materials became easily available. At UNE I had been the only full-time postgraduate student in my Department; at ANU I was one of about eight. All of my fellow students seemed vastly more knowledgeable than me, and I seemed to be the only one who had not studied political science as an undergraduate (it had not been available at UNE). And we had seminars! There were weekly work-in-progress seminars for staff and students not only in our own department but in other departments as well, and some of these, in History, Sociology and Philosophy, were interesting to me. We also had seminars on broad topics in political science, and all of that was relevant to me because most of it was new.

The Research School of Social Sciences, my institutional home, was about research and nothing else. We had no undergraduates. They were taught elsewhere in the university, by another Department of Political Science, in what was called the School of General Studies. It didn't take me long to discover that there was some 'feeling' about all this. The ANU had taken over what had been the Canberra University College (a branch of the University of Melbourne) at the request or insistence of the Commonwealth Government, indeed, of the Prime Minister himself, or so it was said. The new people felt like second-class citizens, and their counterparts today still do. University cultures die hard.

No matter. For us in the RSSH the job was to work hard, undertake fieldwork (I loved it), write the thesis and graduate. I did all that in the regulation three years plus a month or two, and picked up a postdoctoral

travelling fellowship. I was now firmly acculturated to the ANU's dictum that the task was 'to know first the nature of things' (the English version of its Latin motto). UNE's motto had been the rather more Delphic 'from wisdom comes balance', which I hardly thought about at the time and still can't quite understand now. (Does wisdom produce balance? Are balanced people necessarily wise? How balanced is it good for us to be? And so on)

The fellowship took me to Oxford, where I read political theory, played a lot of tennis and table tennis, and apprenticed myself to an American visitor working on electoral behaviour in Britain along with a Fellow of my College (Nuffield). They produced *Political Change in Britain*, a major work that won the Woodrow Wilson prize in the USA, and I had a prefatory mention in it as a research assistant. After a period in the USA working on the chapters of the book I wanted to return to Australia and the ANU to do the same kind of work in my own country. I felt ready for it.

It was a great time for ambition and to be a young Research Fellow. The university system was expanding very rapidly, and for the first time there was money to do things that had never been done before. Survey research was very expensive (it still is) but the needed money was found here, there and everywhere.

I could have stayed at the ANU forever, so attractive was it as a home for someone who happily worked all day and all night on a variety of research projects. I had exceptional colleagues, excellent students and tons of support. The expanding system needed professors, however, and before long I was being asked to 'make myself available'. The first call came when I was barely 30, and I had the sense to decline. The second came from the other Department of Political Science, which had lost one of its two professors to another place. I was asked to apply, thought I could act as a bridge, was courteously treated by L. F. Crisp, the remaining professor, and didn't get the job, which went to Gordon Reid, much the better choice (he was later Governor of Western Australia). Manning Clark, who had offered me a Lectureship in History a few years before, was on the Committee. 'That one wasn't for you,' he said in a kindly way. 'But there'll be another one soon. Anyway, you ought to get out of here.'

He was right in both pieces of advice. A year later I was appointed as the Foundation Professor of Politics at the new Macquarie University in Sydney.

## **Macquarie University, 1971 to 1979 And Gladly Teaching**

Macquarie was founded in 1967, the same year as the University of Canberra (then named Canberra College of Advanced Education) and four other institutions of higher education. So I was not a founding father, and given my youth I had to settle for being a founding younger brother.

With the help of colleagues at the ANU I had designed a complete undergraduate program that would fit in well with Macquarie's new-fangled American style system of semesters, units and credit points. I had been promised five staff in the build-up to my arrival, but I found there were only to be three. The reduction was, for me, the first sign that the system was becoming too expensive, but that is retrospect.

Macquarie was founded by people from Sydney and UNSW who felt that these universities had put too much emphasis on the honours class and too little on teaching the great mass of pass students. Macquarie was to be different, and the difference was expressed in the University's motto, And Gladly Teche. The complete line in Chaucer reads 'And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche', and from time to time I felt our students ought to take heed of the first part of the sentence.

But we taught a lot, and we took teaching seriously. I loved the teaching, especially the big first-year class. It was a good time to be building a department (strictly, a discipline, because 'departments had been banned at Macquarie, as had 'God professors' – both seen as evils of the University of Sydney). By the end of my time Macquarie had a Politics group that was young and energetic, harmonious in temperament, and as good as any in Australia in terms of scholarly production. It was a happy university, with a lot of good people doing worthwhile things, and a general sense of building something worthwhile. As a young professor who had never studied his own subject as an undergraduate I had an constant apprehension that I would be exposed somehow as a fraud, but lost that feeling after a while. I also discovered that it is a common feeling among newly hatched professors!

The 1970s were a decade of great change. The Whitlam Government's appropriation of higher education and the ending of fees brought to Macquarie a host of intelligent and determined married women, but not many of the working class for whom these changes had been designed. Money became tight quite quickly, and we discovered the dangers of 'incremental creep', each year seeming to cost about 2

per cent more than last year, without any change other than advancements up the salary scales and promotions. A sudden reduction in expected Commonwealth funding caught us, and every other university, on the hop. Unemployment and inflation increased sharply, and a generation of PhD students found that there were no jobs to go to.

While I was able to get a large amount of money from the Australian Research Grants Committee in 1978 for a second version of my book on political behaviour, it was becoming clear to me that the great days of expansion and confidence were coming to an end. I was 40, and the idea of being a professor for another 25 years filled me with dread. I asked around my circle of acquaintances for alternatives, but by the time one had arrived I had been offered the chair in my old Department at the ANU, and accepted it.

### **Australian National University, 1980 to 1990 The onset of hardening of the arteries**

Nearly ten years away from the ANU had given me a new sense of the higher education system, but I found that inside my old place perspectives had not much altered. Money was tighter, and my sort of social science was no longer possible at ANU because we were prevented from applying to the ARGC (seen as double dipping). It was harder to get good students, because all universities now had their own postgraduate programmes and rather incestuously kept their best students for themselves. The confident, ambitious tone of the 1960s had gone.

Before very long I found myself being asked to do policy things within the University and outside it. I ceased to be an active researcher, and moved into the role of mentor with my young staff and students. By the middle of the decade I was deeply involved in policy work, as Chairman of the Board of the Institute of Advanced Studies at ANU, Chairman of the ARGC, a member of the Australian Science and Technology Council, a member of CTEC's committee to review Special Research Centres, and so on.

Within the University I was asked (along with two others, one of them Peter Doherty, later a Nobel laureate) to review the expenditure of the Institute, and then to play a part in strategic planning. These initiatives were led by the Vice-Chancellor, Peter Karmel, the best Vice-Chancellor I saw close-up, and made clear to me how reluctant the University was to face up to its situation. The ANU needed to decide to do some things properly and to stop doing or wind down others. But how could you wind

down something that was 'excellent'? In my view 'excellence' was a word that was used far too frequently in Australian universities, and not least in the ANU. The reluctance to face up to the need to re-allocate and to determine some priorities – indeed, to find a new *raison d'être* – continued throughout the 1990s.

In 1987 the Hawke Government created the Australian Research Council, and I was asked to be its founding Chairman. The University gave me leave, and I became a statutory officer of the Commonwealth of Australia. They were turbulent years, and for a time I was the most detested figure in the system, which was a shock, given that I had been generally popular and sought after as a prospective vice-chancellor in the 1980s. By the time my term ended much of that animosity had gone. The Council was really well funded and doing the job it had been set up to do. In the coming years it would be one conspicuous element of the Dawkins changes that everyone wanted to keep.

### **University of Canberra, 1991 to 2002 Another Kind of Building**

At the end of the term on the ARC I decided not to go back to the ANU, which was in a most unhappy state. But what to do instead? The answer was provided through a personal need to remain in Canberra and the urging of a couple of friends. The new University of Canberra needed a Vice-Chancellor, and I was invited to accept that post.

What followed were the happiest and most fulfilling years of my working life. UC needed a mission, identity and recognition, and these were good tasks to undertake. It had excellent staff, a preoccupation with teaching that I liked, and a facility for good applied research.

After ten years in the research business I had developed a certain disenchantment with the universal rhetoric of the importance of pure research and the centrality of research in the university. I felt that 'research' had come to distort the central purpose of the university, which was education. UC proved to be a wonderful place to try to achieve a better balance between teaching and research.

It is for others to say how well we have achieved that synthesis, but all the external indicators suggest we are doing pretty well.

Some things have changed in the last fifty years. The system is huge, expensive and awkward. Universities used to be peripheral to mainstream Australian society. Now they are central. Universities have been through several different modes of funding, and each has required change. UC's \$100 million expenditure this year flows from three sources: 37 per cent from Commonwealth recurrent funding; 23 per cent from the HECS fees paid by Australian students; and 40 per cent from our earnings. Those proportions are likely to change only in the proportion we will have to earn, which will grow. But we have learned to be good at it.

Some things remain much as they were. Universities are exciting places to be, whether as students or as staff. Their central role remains the educating of people for productive, professional careers. They are the underpinning of our form of civilisation. They are privileged places in which to wonder about things, and to try to find out what we do not know. I don't see these roles weakening.

I enjoyed all my universities, and they all shaped me. My first Vice-Chancellor, Sir Robert Madgwick, once wrote that to be a vice-chancellor was an immense privilege, and I agree with him. I would like to think that all my universities prepared me to be a good vice-chancellor. But that, too, is for others to determine.