

'Reinventing universities'

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It is an honour and a pleasure to be asked to give this lecture. As a young man in Canberra in the 1960s I met Sir George Currie, who had retired here, on a number of occasions, and one of his sons, Ian, was my dentist for many years. Sir George was a vice-chancellor of great wisdom and experience, serving in all for 22 years at the University of Western Australia and then at the federated University of New Zealand, the predecessor of all the present-day universities in that country. I hope that some of what I say tonight would win his approval.

My text is a simple one: it is true that the university is one of society's longest-lived institutions, and the principal reason that is so, I argue, is that the institution has learned to adapt to contemporary needs. I go further to argue that the last hundred and fifty years have seen a number of periods of adaptation, and that we are undergoing one at this time. All such accommodations to the need to change are resisted by most of those who inhabit the institution, and that is usually only to be expected. I argue that there should be some understanding of this process, nonetheless, and some appreciation that without change the university would become bypassed as an institution by other competitors for some or all of its functions, which would be even less to the taste of university people generally.

I should add another strand of argument here: the kinds of change I am talking about usually lack defined starting and ending moments, and that has especially been the case in the last fifty years. But we ourselves are likely to supply such markers — for some people the Martin Report of 1963, which established the binary system is one such, and the Green Paper of 1987, which announced the end of it, is another. As I will explain, I think the process is much more subtle and continuous than such defining markers suggest. The demands placed on universities by their society grow and change without much reference to government decisions, which seem always to come afterwards, as a kind of official recognition that something needs to be done.

Let me start with some history, but briefly, because I am sure that much of it would be known to this audience. Only a few years ago we celebrated the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna, which has the distinction of being the oldest continuously operating institution of higher education in the world. But in the 1090s it was not much like either the University of Canberra or the ANU, having evolved out of a cathedral school, possessing no buildings or permanent site, and offering no degrees. The earliest universities were able to chart a course independently of the church through charters issued by popes or kings. For all that, one of their principal purposes was training young men for a career in the church, and later for a career in the state. A modern counterpart would be educating public servants of all kinds, and clerics.

It is architecture which plays the greatest part in inducing us to see universities as unchanging. Oxford University appears as an ancient seat of learning because many of its buildings are ancient, and it is tempting to assume that life within the cloisters has always been the same. But of course it has not been. Balliol College, now perhaps the college of the most intellectually ambitious students in Oxford, was founded as a place for 'artists', and the oldest colleges were little more than endowed boarding houses. And while it is true that 'science' was professed there as early as the 13th century in the person of Roger Bacon, students in the European universities, in most cases up into the 18th century, studied grammar, logic and rhetoric before moving on to law, medicine or theology. Changes to curriculum arising from the European Enlightenment were slow in coming. The 'modern' university owes a great deal more to Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt in early 19th century Prussia and his American admirers than it does to earlier traditions. The early-modern university survived because its products were necessary in contemporary society, and because, for the most part universities kept their heads down. Not all of them survived, incidentally, but those which had useful land generally did, or merged with other similar institutions.

What we take to be the 'traditional' university in Australia is very much a creation of the 19th century, and of the latter part of it especially. The serious study by undergraduates of the natural sciences in a laboratory context is even more recent, being an early 20th century innovation. So is the study of English literature, and of modern languages, in fact of the humanities generally, always excepting philosophy and classics. The social sciences are a little older, with the principal journals dating, for the most part, to the 1880s. Just as universities in early modern times had to establish their independence both from the church and the state, yet maintain good relations with both, so that their independence was not under continual threat, so have modern universities needed to adapt to the changes that have overtaken humanity in the last two centuries. The great growth in the size of the human population, urbanisation, the industrial revolution, the movement toward political democracy, successive improvements in useful technologies, a greater scientific understanding of the basis of reality — I am speaking here of changes which characterise the 19th century, though all of them have continued to be important in our own — led to the development of bodies of thought that we call the social sciences, as well as to the set of disciplines that we call the sciences. Universities were not to the fore in these developments, so far as I can see: they were slow to respond. In fact, it is probably true to say that the universities needed first to be reformed before they could become part of the modern world; this is certainly what happened in Oxford.

There have been four major changes in the 20th century to which universities in Australia have had to adapt; all of them have occurred in the last fifty years. The first was a shift in scale: after the second world war, for a variety of reasons, governments saw the need to expand the system of universities to provide more places, and the community itself began to see further education as a proper pathway for its children, rather than an early exit from education to paid work. Children now included girls as well as boys.

The second was a shift in purpose, and once again the second world war was a primary stimulus: universities were now to become involved in something called 'research', an activity which had not been the province of Australia's universities up until then (it was, of course, the *raison d'être* of the CSIRO, set up in 1926). Research had been important to Australia's war effort, and the Australian National University was founded in 1946 to ensure that Australia would have a high-quality research institute within its own shores. But it was not until the late 1950s, with the establishment of the Commonwealth Postgraduate Scholarship scheme and the beginnings of research infrastructure funding for the universities, followed in 1964 by the establishment of the Australian Research Grants Scheme, that research could be thought an ordinary occupation of all academics.

The third was a further shift in scale, as the various professions, traditional and emerging, realised that to ensure that they had an appropriate share of talented young people it would be necessary to shift professional training from the workplace to the higher education sector, a shift which was acceptable to governments, which were the principal (after 1974, the only) funders of higher education's recurrent activities. Preparing professionals has always been a central role for universities, and especially so in Australia, where a professional class had to be created if its existence was not to depend forever upon immigration. That, and not the need to cherish the flame of pure intellect under the Southern Cross, is the best explanation for the establishment of Australia's 19th century foundations.

The fourth was a set of changes in funding arrangement, and I shall leave that until the end of my address.

Two changes in scale and one of purpose have had a powerful effect on the *Weltanschauung*, the world view, of Australia's academics. There are now some 32,000 academics, and they constitute a large profession that is national in its range, articulate (of course!), and critical rather than supportive of the existing order. They see themselves, correctly, in my view, as having been indispensable or instrumental in the shaping of the Australian nation in the last half-century. In particular, they see research as something that they have a unique handle on, especially what they like to call 'pure' research, which they see as the basis of all understanding, and therefore as the basis of modern life. They are also likely to see themselves, and this has probably been the chief sin of scholars and clerics since the beginning of these occupations, as more than a tad smarter and wiser than ordinary people.

Above all, they believe that they know better than anyone else how universities work, that universities are different to all other institutions, that universities, like bedrooms, are not places into which the state should seek to enter, and that universities should be left alone, other than being properly funded, to get on and do the work that they are there for, work which is finally in everybody's interest. These are beliefs which are often couched in the language of tradition, and point into an immemorial past, or at least to Bologna or Oxford or Paris.

Yet the university world of 1999 is very different from the university world of 1949, let alone that of 1099. Over the last half-century Australia's universities have moved from being peripheral to Australian life to being central. Student

numbers have increased from 30,000 to nearly 700,000. Budget outlays in 1949 were small; today they exceed \$5 billion. Australia was for the most part outside the world of research; it is now a notable research performer. The quality of our graduates, so far as we can tell, is high in world terms, and our universities attract scores of thousands of students from more than 70 countries abroad. Australia's sense of itself, its standing as a curious, tolerant, progressive, open democracy, has been fundamentally shaped by the work of its universities and their graduates. Fifty years ago, university students were largely male, young and fulltime; now they are predominantly female, very substantial numbers are part-time, and they receive their education at university in a great variety of forms. To go to university is now the common expectation of the great majority of 18 year olds.

Because the buildings look the same — this one, in which tonight's event is taking place, is approaching its fiftieth birthday — it does not always occur to people that Australia's universities have been reinventing themselves and their purposes throughout this period. I can speak about this process with some confidence, because I too am approaching my fiftieth year in higher education. That I am an academic at all flows from the decision of the Menzies Government, following the advice of the Murray Committee in 1958, to establish a Commonwealth Postgraduate Scholarship Scheme. I won one of the first scholarships, and without it I would have followed emerging family tradition and become a high school teacher. My lecturers were all interested in research, and eventually published, but the research environment in which they worked was tiny by today's standards. There was, for example, no Australian publishing industry of any consequence; there were few journals, and few of today's major academic journals had been started. Those interested in research that did not have an Australian focus were separated by a six-week boat journey from the world's centres of research — it was not until the mid 1960s, and the arrival of the Boeing 707, that air travel became the accepted way to move around the world and brought Australia into the European and North American research cultures.

The university pre-occupation with research, with postgraduate education, with research funding and research grants, with Pro Vice-Chancellors (Research), with industrial partnerships, with international research links, with the PhD industry and the anxieties which flow from it — all this, I argue, is a form of invention. Over a period of a generation, the Australian university transformed itself into a knowledge-generating as well as a knowledge-transmitting institution. It became international in its perspective and contributed enormously to Australians' sense of who they were and what they had achieved. You can put markers on this process — the foundation of the ANU in 1946, the Murray Committee of 1958, the establishment of the ARGC in 1964 — but the differences in these dates tell us that the process was a slower and more continuous one. Indeed, while the dedication of the newer universities of the late 1980s and early 1990s to the research endeavour emphasises the continuity of the invention, research in these universities started much earlier: RMIT won a Special Research Centre in the mid 1980s against competition from all the existing universities, while my own University's Co-operative Research Centre in Freshwater Ecology, one of the most successful in the CRC company, had its genesis earlier still.

The ways in which different universities now go about organising their research activities tells us something about another process of invention, because Australia has been busily inventing universities during these last fifty years, and they carry the stamp of their origins. The process of the establishment of any university (but I will concentrate here on Australian geneses) is a complex one. Older institutions usually provide models, so the oldest Australian creations were modelled for the most part on Scottish universities. But there are also things to be done, or processes to employ, which fit local needs and circumstances, and these are grafted on. Perhaps, too, the older model has weaknesses or faults which the founders wish to avoid. So those who established Macquarie University in the late 1960s wanted to give great prominence to teaching and students because they felt both to be under-emphasised at Sydney University, which was both the ruling model and the university where most of the founders had come from. Macquarie, like Griffith University, another establishment of the 1960s, began with multi-disciplinary 'schools' and not with 'departments' because of the difficulties that departmental monopolies had created in shaping degree programs in older universities. Macquarie and Canberra (which borrowed the idea from Macquarie) used American unit, credit-point and semester models for organising teaching, rather than the existing course and term models, which were British in origin, because the American system was more appropriate to a time when degree programs were expanding quickly to accommodate new knowledge and new demands.

The new creations, it is also fair to say, were progressively less well funded. Monash University and the University of New South Wales (the latter an old example of a newer general process, since it was formed out of an older technical college) were the only new creations to be funded in the first flush of financial enthusiasm that followed the Murray Report in the late 1950s. The next generation, in the mid to late 1960s, received rather less money, and the creations of the 1970s less money still. The consequences, in library resources, scale of buildings, comprehensiveness of programs and so on, can be seen still. What was involved here were changing views on the part of the Commonwealth Government and its advisers about what necessarily constituted a 'university'. The last set of creations, those of the late 1980s and early 1990s, received very little additional money at all. By and large, they were expected to become fully fledged universities under their own steam, in part because they were thought to have been 'universities' for some time already.

The government's own view of what constituted a university had changed even further with its dismissal of the binary system and the underlying notion that there were both different types of student and (therefore) different types of higher education institution. Each set of newer creations had much in common with earlier institutions, but some marked differences too. In time, the differences became blurred because of extensive imitation. Together the universities constitute an Australian sub-species of the world species of universities. My own judgment, based on a good deal of experience of universities here and elsewhere, is that the members of the Australian group are all more alike than any one of them is like a member of another national sub-species. That is to say, notwithstanding what seem to me specious claims for special excellence on the part of some, Australian

universities have a very great deal in common, and what is common is much more important than what is different.

The changes in scale and purpose were associated with another broad change which I have already referred to: the movement of professional training from the workplace to the higher education sector. Once again, this is not a process which has an obvious starting point, let alone any kind of finishing point. Law, medicine and theology have been associated with universities from the very beginning, and in the 19th century engineering and architecture joined them, followed by agriculture and education. In the 20th century professions have formed out of new disciplines, like economics, psychology and public administration. By mid-century it was common to conceive of the university as, to use an American metaphor, a college of arts and sciences surrounded by a set of professional schools, and the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne both fitted that model. But the extraordinary growth in 'knowledge' (that is to say, what academics discover) of the last fifty years has spun off a large new set of disciplines and professions, all of which can trace their origins to the old college of arts and sciences, but are busily developing their own independent existences, research paradigms, postgraduate programs, international conferences, named chairs and so on. The list of them would astonish an academic of the 1940s: accounting, nursing, tourism, public relations, marketing, management, landscape, ecology, computing, human resource development, information management, optometry, chiropractic, occupational therapy, defence studies, police studies, prison studies... The list is not endless, but it shows no sign of stopping.

It is easy to be scornful of the newest arrivals, as it was in older days, when English literature was added to degree programs, or faculties of education appeared on the scene. When I went off to be a professor at Macquarie University in 1971 my subject, political science, was the newest kid on that block, and the object of occasional loftiness from those already established. This ended with the later arrival of sociology which, it was widely agreed, had no business in a real university, wasn't about anything at all, a kid could do it, kids were doing it, and so on. I have encountered many versions of those attitude over time, physicists who think that the only interesting bits of chemistry are the physics bits (the rest is only for technicians), chemists who say something comparable about geology, humanities people who raise their eyebrows about tourism or management without recognising that these are both areas of applied humanities and social science. What these attitudes demonstrate, above all, is the pervading uncertainty of academics about their own work and its ultimate worth, which is the rock on which peer review rests.

Loftiness about other places and other disciplines, usually without much knowledge of either, is one of our besetting sins as a profession. It flows, as I have just said, from our uncertainty about how good we are, and how good our discipline is, and also from the long time we spent investing in our own human capital, which makes us see other disciplines and other universities as competitors rather than colleagues. This almost generic suspicion and distrust make collegial life difficult, make it awkward for us to act together politically or to market together internationally, and give us a bad reputation with the general public, who can't imagine why we sometimes behave as we do.

Those my age can remember the scorn of those at Sydney and Melbourne for the people setting up new institutions at Kensington ('the Tech', or 'the shop') and Clayton ('the farm'). Ten years or so later, there was united disdain for Macquarie (just a teachers college) and La Trobe ('more professors than students'). I need say little about the attitudes of the older 19 to what are sometimes called 'the Dawkins universities', after the Minister of the day who recognised, perhaps a decade after it was pretty obvious, that the binary system of higher education made no sense. Yet in competitive terms it is not hard to see that many of these newer universities are doing very well in today's difficult economic climate, and that their standards are no less high. In ten years' time no doubt we will all be fussing about the pushiness of today's TAFE colleges as they too advance to the status of 'higher' rather than 'tertiary' education institutions. We never seem to learn, an odd criticism of universities, but then they are not conspicuous examples of 'learning institutions'. As A. P. Rowe, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide in the 1950s, pointed out forty years ago, we 'show great reluctance to undertake any research into [our] own affairs or to face changes in a spirit of experiment' (*If the Gown Fits*, Melbourne 1960, p.14).

All these changes have had profound effects on the structure and temper of all our universities because they have diminished the importance of the college of arts and sciences, which is the part of the university from which come most of those who talk about 'the university' and become vice-chancellors. In my own place about 85 per cent of the students are enrolled in courses that give them either entry to or advancement in a given profession. That is why they are at UC. They all had the opportunity of going somewhere else (we have to turn away a lot of good students). They come because that is what they want to do, and they don't see any need to undertake an arts degree first. As a country we could, nonetheless, have proceeded as was the fashion in the 19th century, and educated everyone in the classics, or science, or the humanities or something general, and then sent them off to their professions to learn how to be a nurse or an accountant or a systems analyst. Why didn't we? First, there is simply too much knowledge about to be fitted easily into disciplinary degree programs. Second, because whatever their rhetoric, a succession of Australian governments has been much more interested in 'skills' than in 'education'. Third, the old model is an elitist or aristocratic model, in which only a very few go to university and are there prepared to take their place among the elite. Ours is an egalitarian society, and everyone wants to go to university and be part of the elite! So our system equips people first of all to acquire sufficient knowledge to earn a civilised living. They have to be educated later, and in fact – with respect to my colleagues in arts faculties where I started – I think that applies to everyone.

I come now to the last of the big changes which has affected us, the change to the way universities are funded. Like the other changes, this one can be supplied with markers, of which the easiest one is the Howard Government's Budget of 1996, which began an explicit 'down-sizing' of the universities. But you ought really to go back to the decision of the Keating Government in the previous year not to fund salary increases in the higher education sector, and let the universities and the unions slug it out in what is known as 'enterprise bargaining' which so far has neither occurred at the level of the enterprise, nor is accurately called a bargain. But you could go back even further, to

1987, when the Hawke Government made clear that it was not going to fund overseas students to come to Australian universities and that universities could charge them fees if they wished. Of course, we wished. Or you could go back further still, perhaps to the Fraser Government's budgets of the early 1980s, in which the funding of students in higher education was slowly but steadily cheapened, a process which has gone on to the present.

There is not, of course, any 'correct' way to fund universities. Funding higher education differs from country to country, and in the same country over time. Australia has known a fees-based system, a mixed fees and Government support system, a wholly Government support system and another kind of combination of fees and Government support. Whether or not you prefer public to private funding, as a citizen, depends on a whole lot of ideological and personal factors. As university participation increases you can argue either that it should be seen as a further stage in the education process for members of our society and therefore as a proper receiver of public funds, or that the argument for a substantial private contribution grows stronger as more people participate: why should those who don't go to university pay taxes to support those who do, when university graduates are likely to earn higher incomes anyway?

There seems little doubt to me that the present Government and its predecessor correctly judged that they could cause these funding changes without electoral harm. The university system has been unable and unprepared to argue its case in a united and cogent way, for the reasons I have outlined already. I therefore expect our present funding regime to continue. It has led to a further reinvention of universities, this time as private rather than as public institutions, or, if you like, as another kind of 'mixed' institution, like Telstra, or the Commonwealth Bank. On the whole, this is not a change whose direction I support, but as a vice-chancellor I have no real option: if my university has to be a business, then it had better be a profitable one, not an unprofitable one.

And this reinvention must lead to a lot of rethinking about what we are for and what we do. A fees-based university, for that is what is surely in prospect, has to think about what it is that students want, and provide it — always, of course, from the perspective of the disinterested professional (for we are a profession). Collectively, we need to recognise that the more successful we are in enrolling and graduating students, the more we change the nature of our society. That means that we have to capture the imagination and interest of our community in a new way, not as monopolists of knowledge and credentials, for we are losing that position quickly, but as institutions whose eyes are on our future and on the knowledge and education that will be necessary. We need to see our alumni as our allies and partners, not as sources of donations. We need to discover what it costs to do what we do, and charge properly for it, and if necessary to find better ways of doing it. We need, especially in this country, to align ourselves with the future, not with the past.

Many academics hate the whole process, and resist it, hoping that in the long run government will come to its senses, or that something good will happen to change the context in which all this occurs. From time to time I share these sentiments, for I am a product of the last great nation-building episode in our

history, and find it hard to accept a perspective that suggests that nation-building is over, and that we need now to concentrate on our private lives. But I know that my university will adapt, because it has already adapted successfully. All our universities will do so, faster or slower according to case, to past history and to the available incentives. What is most necessary is to capture the spirit of the university, its sense of its own purpose, and character, and virtue, and reinvent that for the future. If we do that successfully, we will provide to those who come after us, and to our society, a strong, resilient and useful university system which the society values and supports, in whatever mixture of public and private funding happens to rule at the time.

Yes, reinvention is a hard thing to do. But I return to the body of this address to remind you that the last fifty years can be seen as a period of almost continuous reinvention. It produced a modern, excellent, accessible and attractive set of universities, that now has to be reshaped for the 21st century. I am sure that we will succeed in doing so.