

SUBMISSION

One great University for Australia?

The Crossroads paper comments 'There have been a number of recent calls for Australia to aim to have one or two "world-class" universities.

Whether it is an appropriate goal, whether it is achievable and how it might be achieved, are questions that need to be addressed.'

A prior question for us all, surely, has to be 'What does the call mean?'

What is a world-class university, and how would we recognise one if we fell over it? Who is in a position to judge?

Let's start with an even wider question. Is Australia a world-class country? If the yardstick is possession of military might, then the answer is plainly No. If the yardstick is something like 'Is it a good country to live in?' then there are indexes of the attractiveness of countries as places in which to live and work, and Australia scores very highly on them all. 'Big Mac' indexes and their counterparts also show that Australia's standard of living, measured in what you can buy here with the AUD, is internationally very high.

What indexes mean is always a matter for debate, but in my judgment the message of these indicators is that Australia is a most successful society in its ability to provide a high degree of civilised existence for its citizens. Australia's standing implies that its infrastructure and social services are also of very high quality, because these are the basis for the high quality of our life. Universities are an essential component of that infrastructure.

The other countries that are close to us in these respects, Canada, New Zealand and the Scandinavian set, also possess these virtues. All of them, ourselves included, have high levels of participation in post-secondary education, and university systems that are marked by a generally high standard in their capacity to produce the large numbers of professionals on which all these societies depend for their quality.

On the face of it, the important criterion here seems to be the possession of a high-quality university system, rather than the existence of a 'world-class' university, whatever that is. Australia ranks higher in these indexes than does the USA or the UK, which are conventionally thought to possess one or two of these paragons. I have had something to do with the Canadian university system in the past few years, and there is no doubt that some Canadians are worried about the loss of some of their best academics to American universities that can offer much higher salaries.

But I've never heard anyone say that the answer must be a 'world-class' Canadian university. Of course, you will hear people from the University of Toronto saying these things occasionally, just as you will hear people from the University of Melbourne saying them in our own country. There's not much agreement outside their walls.

Like Australia, Canada is a big country with a dispersed population, and its universities have to serve the manifold interests of the whole country, which they do very well. Denmark and Norway are wealthy small countries whose universities have learned to build bridges to the rest of the world, as Australian universities have done. Even Sweden, whose population is rather less than half that of Australia, concentrates in its higher education endeavours on what is good for Sweden rather than on emulating what is done elsewhere.

So why do some of us expatiate about the apparent need to keep up with the rest of the world by creating one 'best' university, when the evidence suggests that we do very well now? I think there are two broad reasons.

One is that we are long way from anywhere, and we don't have near neighbours from whom we can draw comparisons. The second is that ex-colonial assertiveness which is built into our obsession with competitive sport.

Indeed, the notion that we should have at least one world-class university (or symphony orchestra - I've heard the same claim made in that domain) rests on an assumption that universities and orchestras are like cricket teams: they compete with one another, and the best one wins.

But of course universities and orchestras are not like cricket teams. They have great social and economic, as well as educational, importance to their regions and nation. And they don't, in any meaningful way, compete - especially across the world. It seems to me vastly more important that the quality of our universities and orchestras should be generally high, than that one of them should be seen by somebody as on a par with Stanford, or Cambridge, or the Berlin Philharmonic. To go that way is to get in a search for status, and Australia can do without that.

As it happens, people overseas who know Australian orchestras and universities judge that they're pretty good in world terms. But wouldn't you expect that? After all, on the evidence we are a most successful country, and that means that our universities, like our orchestras and our style of life, should be pretty successful too. They are.

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