

PRIVATE SUBMISSION by Dr Keith TOGNETTI,

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in 1931, H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs, President of the Guild of Undergraduates at UWA., gave a report at a general meeting of the students. The secretary of the guild faithfully recorded both his words and his mood:

Mr Coombs spoke of student life and the attitude students should adopt towards the university as a whole ... [Coombs] enjoined the students to do things, not because they had to, but because it was worth while doing them ... The university was not a graduate shop to train men and women for professions, but the home of knowledge, where they could develop their intellect and ideas.

Universities in Australia have since become more or less what Nugget Coombs feared: graduate shops to train us for professions.

from **SUSIE BYERS** JULY 28, 2008

['Ratbag' student activist decries Education Revolution Eureka Street](#)

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If you read no other parts at least glimpse at this !

On his/her way to give a lecture a physicist passes a sports oval where they see a young man kicking a football . they are stunned to know that what they see is actually part of a University course . Proceeding to the class they give a lecture on quantum theory- arguably the most intellectually demanding of all physical theories- dispirited in the knowledge that most of their students have a lower entrance mark than the football kicker- furthermore most of them are doing physics by default having failed to get into vocational courses of their choice .

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Before Dawkins we had a tertiary system that worked extremely well satisfying the requirements of industry, the schools sector and with a University system of uniformly high standard .

Implementation of the Dawkins policies has overwhelmed our Universities with the twin evils of managerialism and massification . The managerialism in the centralised authoritarian hierarchical form that failed business decades ago has been dredged up and forced onto the Universities by the Canberra Bureaucracy and continues to turn excellent scholars into mediocre managers . Staff have been stripped of leisure and have no time to deeply reflect on their ideas; the result is a proliferation of dreary technical notes addressing some short term problems in industry or commerce , notes that are dressed up as research . One only has to check the record to see that the pro rata output of genuine research within our universities was higher in the original system .

Managerialism fails to accept the reality that genuine academics have a commitment to scholarly activity at an intensity which may cut them off from mundane concerns ; a mathematician can do higher maths and be hopeless at filling out a tax form , a classicist can bring to life some ancient life style and have very little connections with the contemporary world.

In essence our Universities should be able to provide places cut off from the market place in which the mind is cultivated for its own sake , which allow physicists to do physics and so help us to contemplate the glory and wonder of our universe and allow historians to recreate the past and give us back the memory that managerialism is taking away from us . Our true scholars represent a very scarce resource; in fact in Australia they are an endangered species.

Massification has meant that we have misled and corrupted our less academically gifted students into believing that they can really achieve at a high intellectual level when all they are given is some tarted up vocational training . Such pretence is bad for them and a disaster for our intellectual development as a Nation .

The net result is that those courses that are perceived as having a high intellectual content are shunned or debased to such an extent that only the lowest achievers enrol and they select these courses by default as they have been rejected by most other courses . So the lecturer has to shield the students from the really sophisticated content of the course and never dare to challenge them with unsolved problems , an approach that used to be the lifeblood of a University education. The grievous fault here is the gradgrindery financing for the Universities based entirely on dictating the structure by the brute force of student numbers with no concern for the intellectual content of courses . If we don't have the guts to invest in such intellectual risk capital we will, even more rapidly, become an intellectually derivative society (already we spend less than Korea on tertiary education) .

On his/her way to give a lecture a physicist passes a sports oval where they see a young man kicking a football . they are stunned to know that what they see is actually part of a University course . Proceeding to the class they give a lecture on quantum theory- arguably the most intellectually demanding of all physical theories- dispirited in the knowledge that most of their students have a lower entrance mark than the football kicker- furthermore most of them are doing physics by default having failed to get into vocational courses of their choice .

This topsy-turvy situation typifies the sickness that has swept through the Australian tertiary system . We are told that the technology of the future will demand breakthroughs in esoteric areas of physics and mathematics and yet all we see is a trickle of graduates in these areas What is more we have a market driven national education policy which actively discourages really talented students from entering these areas .

In contrast we see a great glut of lawyers , accountants and other money based technicians gushing forth from the system .

Our physicist has to publish in research journals that are vetted at the highest conceivable level . In contrast we now have staff working in such vocational areas as hotel management , who have never published in anything even remotely resembling such journals . What is more galling is the knowledge that such staff can actually sit on committees that allocate funds for research in core areas .

By scholarly **CORE** is meant the collection of disciplines and insights that is the essence of a University . It is suggested that a workable approach to establish this core is simply to go through a stripping exercise ; stripping off various activities one at a time and

asking whether the remnants could still be considered to constitute a University . Let me emphasise that I am not proposing to create a static concept that binds us to a never changing model ; rather what I have in mind is a dynamic evolving structure that has a sound traditional framework but which encourages creative leaps to be made from that framework .

Another approach to this core concept is to ask what insights and curricula are demanded to attack the open problems at the forefront of knowledge . If we are not prepared to attack these problems we will indeed become a derivative society and should at least stop using the word innovative .

We also hear protests for example that as English literature is a relatively recent university subject and laboratory-based science teaching is hardly a hundred years old, then there really can't be such a thing as a core . But such observations give us evidence for claiming the opposite that the core is indeed the source of the dynamic for which we strive . What is more it was more dynamic in the pre Dawkins' era - for example the arrival of the electronic computer (and any other breakthrough from nothing to something) represented a bigger step than anything that followed or could follow in a system stultified by managerialism -do not forget that one of the founding fathers of the modern computer was a pure mathematician working in a very esoteric area of logic . The likes of Turing and Feynman couldn't even get a tenured position in the present system as they would not be prepared to sing the company song .

We must protect core activities from the market place- the market is no guarantee of quality as we see from the growth of fast food and other pop cultures. Because we have no such protection we now have a proliferation of fast track degrees which provide no time for scholarly reflection . We must also protect our Universities from the greed of the corporate sector " The University is the corporate realisation of man's basic determination to know " - - Jaspers, K. "

History shows that the first institution to be stripped and controlled (after communications have been taken over) by a totalitarian dictatorship is the University system . . " A mechanism that allows ministerial intervention in an individual Department of a University threatens three fundamental freedoms : the freedom of research in subjects of as yet unrecognised importance , the freedom to question received wisdom ; and the freedom to be protected from direct and narrow political interference by the government of the day - British Reform Bill that was recently rejected by the House of Lords.(Nature , Vol 331 28 Jan 88)" Without such a traditional open University system civilised society cannot progress

Lord Rutherford - " There is either physics . . . or stamp collecting " . For those who have the intellectual depth perhaps the most demanding of all disciplines is theoretical physics - and let me say it very strongly - the more power the more adaptability - for example it was only this elite and their pure brethren in maths who were able to immediately understand the new language of chaos theory , the rest of us including traditional applied mathematicians had(and are having) a terrible time making up the gaps .

Consider quantum theory - a very esoteric activity indulged in by boffins in an ivory tower and having no connection with the flavour of the month informatics - Wrong ! As reported in recent issues of New Scientist September 96 , p 27 the biggest breakthrough in computers will happen when the first quantum computer is built and that could be very soon (quantum cryptography is already operational !) . Now this is where our system has got it wrong - instead of just appointing someone who is working in that particular computer area we should be also giving high priority to building up scholars studying the deepest and most general aspects of this theory so that we can anticipate are prepared for the next development .

Academics have been stripped of their leisure ; apart from their lectures and laboratory work , if they are not filling out student forms for assessment , performance indicators and flooding Canberra with even more data , or prattling on at some committee or making out yet another research application(with an 80% chance of failure) then they are considered to be idle . This despite the fact that leisure(it has the same root as scholarship) for a creative academic is the time when contemplation and reflection takes place - the most vital of times for a scholar . (This is the basis of the words of David Packard who is a founder of Hewlett- Packard - Report of White House Science Council - Federal Laboratory Review Panel 1983) Academics have now been degraded to mere fungibles.

What the committee must do as a beginning is reduce the amount of clutter that is building up about academics and help restore a genuine University ethos . Central to this is the value we place on an education that allows genuine scholarship to flourish versus vocational training . If we really value scholarship this should be reflected in the price : a genuine scholar will make a contribution to society beyond money whereas those who enrol only to earn money should be charged more for their training ; their short term greed rarely leads to a long term contribution to the values of a civilised society beyond money.

QUESTIONS

1 By requiring each Institution to state precisely how they implemented the recently government forced cuts the committee will learn more about the genuine academic values within that Institution than from any of the glossy marketing hype which is served up .

2 If we have any effective national planning for the tertiary system then why is it that we have X lawyers practising and yet there are Y law students ??

3 . How is it that we defend elitism in sport but erode elitism in our universities and even worse we have now returned to class elitism through charging full fees where the rich may buy University places ?

PRESCRIPTIVE SECTION

1 Identify core activities, as defined above, within the system .

2 Establish a distributed binary system consisting of a vocational and a core component . Fund the core component with Commonwealth ear marked funds and the

vocational component with ear marked taxes from Industry and increased HEX charges for vocational students .

2 Set up a system of core scholarships for school leavers (preferably starting in their last year of school) together with undergraduate and PhD scholarships .

3. Must guarantee a career path after graduation for a critical number of core scholars both within the University and CSIRO system . This is crucial ; to educate a core scholar who is then forced to leave Australia so as to get a career is a terrible waste of our resources .

4 The implementation of the core funding should be done on a national basis and finance distributed to various campuses with checks to prevent local drainage to vocational activities .

Summary

1. The Dawkins' policies which overwhelmed our Universities with the twin evils of managerialism and massification has had a devastating effect on the core subjects (physics(especially theoretical) , maths, . . . classics , much of arts) and a stultifying effect on scholarly creativity .

2. At the same time there has been a proliferation of vocationally oriented courses many of which would be better served in a TAFE setting . This misalliance between core and vocational strands is seriously damaging the governance of the core strand especially in respect to research funding .

3 The determining criteria as to what goes into the core is not just the discipline but whether the questions being asked lead to deeper questions or merely provide answers to some utilitarian problem of little scholarly substance . The other vital criterion is time: whereas the vocational component is characterised by short term projects the core is characterised by long term endeavours (many of them going back to the ancients) .

4. This submission accepts the challenge of regenerating these core activities and proposes an appropriate administrative structure which could assure their viability . It is claimed that only by prioritising Commonwealth funding for such core areas can this viability be guaranteed . What is more the core can be saved only if the entire package is implemented .

5 Instead of the de-facto haphazard pluralism of the present system we should have a distributed binary system in which the two components core and vocational may coexist at the same physical location . But the governance of and funding for these components should be quite separate and insulated from leaks .

6 It is vital that the local governance of each is quite separate otherwise the vocational will continue to overwhelm and diminish the scholarly component .

7 All vocational courses including medicine , engineering , commerce , law should be transferred to the vocational component and taught mainly by dedicated teachers . Those

students wishing to become research engineers and medical scientists will of course continue to study a mix and be funded as core students .

8 FUNDING a) core component -should be entirely from the Federal Government . This should be seen as an investment in our intellectual wealth and for the common good . The funding should be ear marked specifically for the core with checks to prevent leaks into other components .

b) vocational courses - should be mostly from industry through specific taxes , students in these courses should pay a higher HEX loading than with the core subjects . These students have been enrolled to be trained for a job which will benefit them and industry financially ;they contribute nothing to scholarship in fact they are a net drain on scholarship .

9 A long term aim of the system should be to set up a teaching component which specialises in assembling and preparing computer aided teaching modules for the drill components associated with all core subjects . None of the core disciplines should be exempt as each has routine drill components which would be better detached and taught by dedicated teachers .

10 . The problems of tenure and autonomy should brought out into the open and energetically debated within the academic