



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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## Some Heretical Ideas About Universities

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If I were to ask each of you to outline your understanding of the idea of a university, I am sure that there would be marked differences of substance and emphasis in the replies. Equally, I am sure that the views elaborated would in many cases be very strongly held. That is what makes the idea of a university so contentious. Like a battering ram, it has major impact but little precision. As so often in English usage, the definite article is problematic. Had John Henry Newman resisted the word "the", and described his famous treatise as, "some ideas about universities", or "ideas about some universities", or "ideas for a new university in Ireland", much academic huffing and puffing might have been avoided.

Universities are among history's most robust institutions. Forgetting their roots in Plato's Academy, there have been more than nine centuries of continuous history since the first monastic universities appeared in Europe. But it has not been through one defining "idea of a university" that these curious institutions have worked their civilizing alchemy for nearly a millennium; it is through many evolving ideas about what a university is and what it stands for.

At the beginning of that long history, the monastic university was concerned exclusively with the preservation of knowledge and its transmission to successive generations of monastic clergy. Scholasticism then re-shaped the idea of a university. By opening their doors to the lay clergy, who were active in parochial rather than monastic activities, universities were exposed to a wider range of social and intellectual issues. This did not make them in any sense secular institutions, but it did promote authentic intellectual activity. Increasingly irreverent critiques of received wisdom became possible (if often dangerous) in such universities, and rational inquiry began, tentatively at first, to test the boundaries of faith-based knowledge.

The intellectual culture and values of Renaissance universities still bore only the most distant resemblance to modern ideals of academic freedom, rational inquiry and the pursuit of truth for its own sake. Yet major changes were afoot. The rise of humanism, the resurgence of classicism and the early development of empirical science combined to strengthen and enrich the increasingly this-worldly orientation of higher learning. These were slow processes. The modern idea of a secular university as a place where rational inquiry and the remorseless logic of empirical falsifiability hold sway would have remained incomprehensible, at least until the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, and unwelcome until well into the 19th, when a flowering of explicitly secular universities accompanied a more general secularization in British, European and North American cultures.

Perhaps the first modern statement of the principle of academic freedom came from the stern, no-nonsense Prussian intellectual and bureaucrat, Wilhelm von Humboldt, who more than any other single individual, a man uniquely influential in the development of modern German ideas about universities. His advice to the founders of the new University of Berlin in 1809 remains as acute and relevant as ever. Appoint "the best intellects available," he told them, "and give them the freedom to carry on their research

wherever it leads." For von Humboldt, fatefully, that meant giving the State a decisive role in academic appointments. Scholars, whom he described as, "the unruliest and most difficult to pacify of all peoples", could not in his view be trusted to make judgements based on merit alone. "They besiege me", he told his wife in a private letter, "with their eternally self-thwarting interests, their jealousy, their envy, their passion to govern, their one-sided opinions, in which each believes that his discipline alone has earned support and encouragement." In the Prussia of 1809, we must presume, the same was not true of politicians and bureaucrats, for it was to them that von Humboldt turned to remedy these anarchic tendencies within the academy.

History suggests that the idea of the State as a benign custodian of the idea of a university is problematic. I will come to that later. For now let me focus on Humboldt's emphasis on "research." For he was one of the first to combine the idea of research with the idea of a university. His influence was profound in German higher education, and the impact of German thinking on universities elsewhere made von Humboldt, in a meaningful sense, the father of the research university. In a passage distinguishing the idea of higher education from that of secondary education, he emphasised research as the primary differentiation. "It is a ... characteristic of institutions of higher learning," he explained, "that they always treat knowledge as an as yet unsolved problem, and thus always stay at research, whereas the secondary school learns about and deals only with well established and derived principles."

Such ideas sound entirely familiar, even self-evident, to contemporary ears, and it is easy to forget how novel the idea of universities as research institutions was when von Humboldt threw his authority behind it, or how much opposition there would be in Europe before an emphasis on research infiltrated the much older idea that universities were essentially places for scholarly teaching and learning. As late as the 1870s, in a famous outburst, the leading British educationalist of his generation, Benjamin Jowett, the Master of Balliol College, Oxford, rejected the idea of a research university as a fundamental threat to the tutorial system upon which Oxford had built its scholarly reputation. To him the idea of the research university remained not only novel, but anathema.

Jowett, however, was fighting a losing battle. Led by giants like Charles William Eliot of Harvard, the great American universities accepted the German rather than the Oxbridge approach, and it was just a matter of time before Oxford, Cambridge and all other major universities embraced research as a proper function for a university. The modern academy now finds the idea of the research university not just legitimate, but iconic. Not all universities need be research universities (except, perhaps, in the minds of Australian higher education policy makers), but research is the driving force in the world's leading universities.

What, if anything, enduring throughout the long evolution of the idea of a university, remains non-negotiable? I can identify just three things. The first is the idea of a university as a place where knowledge is valued for its own sake, whether out of a Medieval conviction that all truth is God's truth, and therefore profoundly valuable, or simply because we are homo sapiens, the thinking, knowing creature for whom the ability to learn and reason is what makes us human. Either way, an essential justification of scholarship and rational, disciplined inquiry has endured. Knowledge is supremely valuable for its own sake; and the search for knowledge is an activity needing no extrinsic justification.

The second non-negotiable element, I believe, is the idea of a university as a place where useful knowledge is pursued systematically, and where students are educated to be knowledge workers of one kind or another. The first Western universities were the essential training institutions that created an educated, professional workforce for the medieval world. The quest for useful knowledge remains more important than ever in the

contemporary research university, as does the preservation, transmission and advancement of discrete bodies of professional and vocational knowledge. The vocational function has been an enduring element in the idea of a university.

The final enduring element has been the idea of a university as a civilizing institution: a cultural bridge across the generations for what Matthew Arnold once called "the best that is known and thought in the world". The idea is that through a broad, liberal curriculum which nurtures and values rationality, tolerance, imagination and creativity, universities help create and sustain rich cultural institutions and contribute to the personal moral development of their students. Such a university education makes people wiser, more discriminating, less readily prey to prejudice or irrationality, and thus prepares them to be leaders in a well-founded civil society.

A veritable kaleidoscope of ideas about universities has been shaken and reconfigured many times over almost a millennium. Values and ideals once held sacrosanct have been discounted, just as many now held sacrosanct have often had remarkably short pedigrees. But those three elements – the valuing of knowledge for its own sake, the valuing of knowledge for the vocational and practical benefits it confers, and the valuing of universities as civilising institutions – have remained central.

But when the environment in which it operates changes as rapidly and pervasively as the world of higher education is changing in the early 21st century, no institution, whatever its longevity, is invulnerable, and not even the most strongly held values may be taken for granted. My theme tonight is that while there is no threat to vocational higher education or the pursuit of useful knowledge, there is a danger that in the contemporary circumstances of higher education, the value traditionally placed on knowledge for its own sake may be abandoned, along with the idea of universities as civilizing institutions. These previously non-negotiable elements are now being called into question by a series of what I will call "heretical" ideas about universities.

The first is the heretical idea *all* universities should undertake a significant level of research. I will refer to it as the single mission heresy.

As I have indicated, the idea of a research university has been extant for little more than 10 per cent of the long institutional history of the Western university. It remains a wonderfully creative idea. But like many important insights, it can be turned by intellectual sleight of hand into something harmful. That line is crossed, I believe, when research activity is made a mandatory requirement for *all* universities – a tendency particularly pronounced in Australia. Academics, politicians and policy makers alike have succumbed to the temptation to make the idea of the research university normative, and to deny authenticity as a university to institutions not exhibiting a significant level of research activity.

In many contexts that clearly does not matter. The Humboltian ideal of a university as a community of scholars and students linked in a common commitment to intellectual discovery – the scholars as researchers and the students as aspiring scholars – has been an immensely empowering paradigm for many great institutions of higher learning since the later 19th century. So it remains. Our own university, Melbourne, is firmly committed to that paradigm, and continues to be dominated and mobilized by it in powerful and creative ways.

But the idea that a university is legitimate only if and to the extent that it engages in research is a false and destructive dogma. By enshrining it as a criterion upon which universities will be defined and accredited in Australia, State and Commonwealth Ministers of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, through their so-called "MCEETYA Guidelines", have placed an unnecessary burden on the Australian higher education system.

Dogmatically pursued, the single mission heresy threatens to stultify pedagogic and institutional innovation in Australian higher education. By placing pressure on universities traditionally focused on good teaching to divert scarce resources into a costly and often forlorn pursuit of research credentials, it may jeopardize educational quality. By insisting on a research criterion for accrediting new institutions as universities, it also rules out the development of innovative kinds of teaching-only universities.

Taken to its logical conclusion, the MCEETYA approach would prevent the emergence in Australia of the kinds of high quality on-line providers that modern societies seem certain to need, because such institutions will almost certainly need to concentrate on teaching rather than research. The successful Phoenix University in the United States would remain unrecognized in an Australian higher education system shaped by MCEETYA. Nor could "corporate universities" develop here. More than 2,000 such universities have emerged in America and Europe over the past few decades to meet an evident need for highly-focused executive education, training and skills up-grading for people already in the workforce. Under the MCEETYA Guidelines a comparable institutional flexibility is impossible in Australia.

The single mission approach is also uniquely expensive. Australian policy makers are opting for the most costly of solutions at a time when funding levels in Australian universities already fall well short of those in most leading industrial countries. Elsewhere, rapidly growing demand and increasingly diverse educational and training needs are creating wide-spectrum, cost-effective higher education systems incorporating a range of "multiple mission" universities.

Even the best-funded university system in the world has avoided Australia's costly approach. Americans aspiring to a superb liberal education frequently choose Vassar College, or one of the other of the great North-Eastern or Californian institutions that concentrate more or less exclusively on wonderfully scholarly teaching. No one doubts that a degree from Vassar is an excellent higher education qualification – except, perhaps, the authors of the "MCEETYA Guidelines". So while many other jurisdictions around the world are replicating this American model of a differentiated, "multiple mission" system, the heretical idea that only research universities are authentic is saddling Australian higher education with extra lead that the system simply cannot afford to carry.

My second target tonight is the heretical idea that, for universities, public funding is uniquely legitimate.

Perhaps more than anywhere else, Australia has reified the idea of a public university. In most parts of the world, public universities, creatures of the 19th and 20th centuries, remain only one model among several. But in Australian higher education debates are often dominated by people suspicious of any funding that does not come from the public purse.

The ideological strength of these convictions is astonishing. Even when they are obliged by sheer weight of evidence to concede that levels of public funding fall well short of what is required for an internationally competitive higher education system, people persuaded of the unique legitimacy of public funding still commonly resist private funding strategies with partisan zeal, and oppose in principle the engagement of universities in commercial activities.

In assuming that public funding alone is free from corrupting influences associated with the power of the purse, advocates of the public university are either implying that he (or she) who pays the piper calls the tune – except, curiously, when Government is the paymaster – or, alternatively, insisting that Governments always play wholesome and uplifting tunes. The corollary is that sponsorship, benign in its public form, undermines

the very legitimacy of the idea of a university when it comes from private sources, and especially from the commercial world.

Having been a Vice-Chancellor for 13 years, that seems to me to be an arrestingly innocent view. No one remotely in touch with reality could believe that Government funding flows to universities without either strings attached or far-reaching policy interventions. Those advocating the exclusive legitimacy of public funding must therefore believe that Government interventions are uniformly benign. But that, too, seems extraordinarily naïve. The truth is that all funding entails a danger of undue influence. The immense importance that universities have placed historically on high levels of institutional autonomy is a measure of their determination to ensure that no patron, whether a medieval prince, a fee-paying student, a profit-driven corporation sponsoring research or a modern state, is ever able to compromise the integrity of scholarship or the independence of research.

The irony is that Government paymasters are usually the most demanding of all sponsors when it comes to trying to call the tune in the academy. Indeed, as public funding declines in proportion to total funding, Governments have in recent decades tried to increase, not relax, their control over universities, often in ways that would be comic were they not so potentially serious. The establishment of highly prescriptive quality assurance procedures and agencies has, for example, accompanied the steady decline in real funding levels in many jurisdictions. A Government no longer able to fund quality at competitive levels, often succumbs to the Quixotic alternative of mandating quality outcomes – usually, perversely, with a threat to reduce funding levels further if quality continues to deteriorate.

Governments also pressure public universities to comply with public policy objectives that have no specifically educational relevance. Thus in the contemporary Australian higher education debate, universities have been warned that to be eligible for a share of \$404 million – a significant tranche of funding – foreshadowed under the proposed "Nelson reforms" – they will have to give all new staff the option of individual contracts that would over-ride any current Enterprise Agreement. In addition, they must not encourage union membership, whether by distributing membership forms to new staff, paying the salaries of full-time union staff or providing unions with rent-free premises. These may or may not be worthy objectives, depending on an individual's view of industrial relations, but they certainly represent a blunt use of the Commonwealth's funding powers to micro-manage universities.

At a more political level, too, Governments sometimes expect to call the tune. I have had to resist threatened Government interference in academic appointments or calls by Ministers to discipline academics for making inconvenient public critiques of Government policy. In Australia, fortunately, a Vice-Chancellor backed by a resolute Council, readily holds the line in such cases. But far more sinister and systematic political interference characterized the sad history of 20th century universities in totalitarian and dictatorial regimes. Historical and contemporary experience indicates that Governments, far from being unimpeachable, are actually more likely than any other paymaster to want to call the tune.

If the heretical idea that public funding is uniquely legitimate was simply naïve, it might be indulged as a harmless idiosyncrasy. Its advocacy is, however, by seeking to deny universities *non-Government revenue streams*, has damaging implications for higher education quality. No one denies that Governments should fund universities. While greatly benefiting the individuals receiving it, higher education is a major public good, and the funding of a wide range of university purposes from the public purse is thoroughly justified, and vitally necessary.

But when I read that Britain's two lecturers' unions are calling on the Blair Labour Government to increase taxes rather than raise student fees, I cannot not help hearing a sub-text of bourgeois self-interest. For the sad truth is that those who access universities in Britain and Australia come largely from the most privileged 30 per cent of the wider society. In such circumstances, a large proportion of the taxpayer funding going into higher education is, inevitably, a hidden subsidy paid by the majority of taxpayers who do *not* go to university to the predominantly middle class student populations who, by graduating, greatly increase their lifetime earning potential. Middle class welfare cannot, surely, be a competitive priority for any Government in the modern world?

Finally, let me discuss what I will call the instrumental heresy. The idea of a 21st century university may be in danger of being pared down to a narrower, instrumental core of no-nonsense professional education, increasingly targeted research, efficient research training and well-articulated technology transfer functions. It is the instrumental focus on wealth creation that excites politicians about higher education; and the public policy settings that Governments favour all value universities essentially for their contributions to applied science and technology, for their role as producers of human capital, and for their value as sources of the basic intellectual property required for innovation and commercialisation in a knowledge economy. Policy references to education as a humane, liberal, civilising process are, by comparison, perfunctory.

Broadly speaking, two major developments, one economic and the other philosophical, are responsible for this utilitarian impetus. The first is the centrality of knowledge creation and innovation as drivers of economic activity in developed societies. Robert Reich, a leading Harvard economist and President Clinton's Secretary for Labor, has predicted in his seminal publication, *The Work of Nations*, that a knowledge economy will be dominated by "knowledge workers", who will make up around 40 per cent of its workforce. Assuming he is right, the communications systems through which information is stored, disseminated, analysed and utilised, and the knowledge institutions producing the scientists, technologists, economists, researchers and thinkers who create new knowledge, and educating and training "knowledge workers", will be the fundamental infrastructure of the future. Professionally educated, skilled people will be the knowledge economy's most precious resource. Reich therefore concluded that the capacity to train, retain and add value to knowledge workers is becoming the single most important determinant of competitiveness and profitability for companies, nations and regional trading blocs. The empires of the future, in Winston Churchill's haunting words, will be empires of the mind.

In such empires, the idea of a university will surely reach a sublime apotheosis. Demand for higher education is stronger, and more broadly based, in the contemporary world than ever before. Participation rates in 2003 are at an historic high, and rising. Universities are increasingly valued as providers of sophisticated professional education and advanced training for knowledge workers, and as research institutions, especially in areas where commercial applications seem likely. In the world's most advanced economies, the application of ideas coming out of university laboratories is acknowledged as a key driver of innovation and economic growth.

But is something being lost in this apotheosis of the vocational, the practical, the applied and the useful? As instrumental institutions, 21st century universities will preserve part of the 900-year-old idea of a university, but what of the other two enduring characteristics identified earlier in this analysis: the valuing of knowledge and inquiry for their own sake, and the civilizing mission of sustaining well-founded civil societies? Will the idea of instrumental utility, pursued to the exclusion of all else, reduce the ancient paradigm to a rudimentary utilitarian parody of its historic richness?

If so, the fault will lie partly within the academy itself. For at a time when, arguably, the world needs powerful civilising institutions more than ever, universities seem to be losing the capacity, and even the will, to tackle the great philosophical and moral questions through which humankind seeks meaning and guidance, and through which humane, sustainable civil societies are built.

A narrowing of the Western academic mind has been widely explored by observers from across the political and philosophical spectrum. In last year's Menzies Oration we heard the liberal-minded Bernard Shapiro reflect on the increasing reticence of academics "to deal with our students explicitly and continuously about the ethical dimensions" of knowledge. That has been a trend observable for most of the 20th century. The intellectual and cultural verities at the heart of Western institutions have been weakened by philosophical uncertainty and ideological dissonance. Universities in the Western tradition, wonderfully adept at pushing back the scientific and technological boundaries of human knowledge and skill, have become less willing, less confident and less able to offer students any coherent legitimation of the cultural, moral and philosophical underpinnings of Western civilization.

A nervous disposition in academic language towards the shifting norms of political correctness is but a pale shadow of the towering cultural confidence and responsibility of Jowett at Balliol or Eliot at Harvard. The ascendancy of epistemological and philosophical pluralism has left academic teachers uncertain about their capacity - and unsure of their authority - to go beyond questions of truth to the advocacy of values, or to try to inculcate civic virtues as well as useful knowledge. The vogue of post-modernism has accentuated intellectual anomie within the academy.

There are of course exceptions to such trends. I am proud to say that the University of Melbourne is taking seriously its moral and civic obligations to serve wider communities, in and beyond Australia, through a range of cultural, financial and educational programs. The truth nevertheless remains that the Western intellectual community, including those members of it who teach undergraduates in good universities - sit loose to the idea that they have a responsibility for training citizens. More comfortable with value-free definitions of their responsibilities as scholars, teachers and researchers, when they do range beyond these narrow professional boundaries into social commentary, they speak more often as iconoclasts, critics and prophets of despair than as confident advocates of particular moral or philosophical positions.

At a philosophical level, what makes a concentration on the idea of instrumental utility heretical is its narrow materialism. It implies that tackling material needs, solving economic problems and securing economic growth, will resolve problems of cultural alienation by ameliorating economic deprivation. The premise is that sustained material improvement driven by advanced vocational education and training will suffice to create stable, just, humane civil societies, and provide an effective antidote to chronic poverty in human societies.

The assumption embedded in such thinking is that such things as civic morality, generosity of spirit, global vision, empathy with the less privileged, tolerance of diversity and genuine commitment to human rights, are merely reflections of fundamentally deeper realities dictated by economic systems and material culture. To resolve the deep problems of poverty, powerlessness and alienation in human societies, all that really matters (if this line of argument is valid) is who owns and controls and has access to material goods and satisfactions, and to the health, wealth, security and material comfort that commonly accompanies them. That, I think, is the intellectual default position in confident, modern, secular consciousness.

But is it valid? Humankind is taking a stupendous risk in counting on any exclusively materialistic social theory. Civilised norms, humane values and respect for human rights

are undermined, I suspect, by cultural alienation as well as by economic deprivation. In themselves, wealth and material comfort seem more likely to promote complacency than to create compassion. Altruism, like justice or the idea of universal human rights may seem like self-evident truths to some, but they are also teachable. They may be learned.

Suppose, then, that is not *either* the cultural or the material dimension of human life that is profoundly formative; but that both are. The key challenge for the 21st century university will then be to bring to those deprived of them not only the manifold economic benefits of sophisticated modern technologies and innovations, but also the civilising power of broad, liberal, humane values and beliefs, and the intellectual excitement of truth for its own sake.

The third heresy, if I may paraphrase a passage from T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, is the greatest evil. The heretical idea that all universities should be research universities, will, left unchallenged, make higher education as a whole much more expensive than it might be, and much more narrowly focused than it should be. The idea that public universities - and particularly the public funding of universities - are somehow uniquely legitimate is also heretical. It will leave universities in jurisdictions where it prevails increasingly unsustainable financially without making access to them any more equitable. But the heretical idea of the exclusively instrumental university threatens to rob humankind of the subtle and formative civilising influences through which, historically, universities have sustained and enriched fragile civil societies.

That would be an incalculable evil. What a costly irony it would be if universities, inheritors of a great civilizing mission to promote critical inquiry, encourage original critiques of conventional wisdom and embrace moral seriousness, ended up producing the great *idiot savants* of history, sophisticated barbarians possessing terrifying power and knowledge, yet bereft of the guiding values and wisdom to use their stewardship prudently, wisely and justly.