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Willing to Try: the introduction of the Melbourne Model

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I thank the Sir Robert Menzies Memorial Foundation for the invitation to deliver this lecture. It is an honour to join a roll call of speakers that includes a Prime Minister, herself a graduate of this institution, and university leaders from several continents.

This series, now in its nineteenth year, celebrates the sustained contribution to higher education of Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister. A graduate in law from the University of Melbourne, Sir Robert Menzies commissioned key reports into higher education and oversaw a substantial expansion of the university system during his time in public life. On retirement in 1966 he agreed to serve as the University of Melbourne's thirteenth Chancellor.

At each graduation ceremony during his chancellorship, Sir Robert joined in the celebration of those receiving doctoral degrees.

Every person walking across this stage to collect a PhD carries in their gown not just years of hard work, but courage. To find a topic, propose a thesis, and dedicate a significant portion of your life to testing that proposition is a brave decision.

Women and men have been crossing the stage to collect doctorates here at the University of Melbourne since 1948. Melbourne was the first university in the nation to award this highest of tertiary qualifications, and among the first in Australia to make research an essential part of a university.

In doing so, Melbourne broke with received tradition.

For the first century of tertiary education in this country, the purpose of a university was teaching, and a masters degree the standard qualification for academics. Following British tradition, universities imparted knowledge and good characters to their students. In *The Idea of a University*, written in late 1852, Oxford graduate John Henry Newman saw knowledge as a worthwhile end in itself – a liberal education to exercise the mind, reason and reflection.

The cultivation of the intellect through teaching universal knowledge, advised Newman, should be the sole purpose of a university. There could be no place for research. Scientific and philosophical discovery are not appropriate for an institution focused on students.

While Newman wrote, a bill before the Victorian legislature created the University of Melbourne. Its founders selected a coat of arms evoking wisdom under southern skies. For the handful of men who would begin classes in April 1855 they chose four professors to teach the world of learning – mathematics, classics, natural sciences and modern history.

Yet Melbourne was never destined to follow Newman's template as a place of contemplation, distant from the world.

Most students chose not to live on campus, and so to be part of the residential learning community envisaged by Newman.

More fundamentally, the original legislation assumed the university would offer not just arts and science, but professional qualifications. Medicine, law and music were among the possibilities contemplated by the Victorian Parliament, and many more fields of professional study would follow, as demand in the colony warranted.

The university would become known to its students as 'the shop' – a pragmatic label, reflecting an institution in which students, travelling to campus each day, studied for future careers rather than embracing, as Newman might hope, the character forming qualities of scholarship.

These early patterns endured. The sandstone buildings and beautiful south lawn at Parkville evoke still the classic nineteenth century campus. We work within the grammar of tradition, enjoy Latin tags, wear tasselled gowns, and delight in elaborate ceremonies.

Yet behind these symbols of continuity, purpose shifts over time. A university can project an unchanging nature while quietly revising the most fundamental basis of its character.

Thus in the 1880s, the university broke with its founding spirit by inviting two new groups onto campus. Women were originally confined to Arts but admitted as students into all faculties by 1887.

And allowing research on campus proved an equally controversial matter. The duty of a professor, said one Council member in 1878, is to 'impart, not invent'. It would be another decade before the appointment of professors committed to research in chemistry and botany.

These were important decisions, with consequences that unfolded slowly.

It would take a century before female enrolments at Melbourne equalled those of men. Today women account of a majority of students in all but three faculties.

Likewise, it required decades to build the facilities, and train the people essential to research. It has taken a long, slow transition for research to become central to the identity of the institution. Yet these sustained efforts have yielded impressive results. In 2010 Melbourne is the top-ranked Australian university as measured by research income, publications, citations and doctoral graduations. It is the largest research

organisation in the nation after the CSIRO, and among the top research universities in the world according to the most authoritative global rankings.

A university then, is not fixed or immutable, despite appearances to the contrary. It can revisit its membership and of character, adding women to the student body, developing a whole new sense of purpose around research.

Such change continues. As biomedical research in particular becomes a large and expensive activity, requiring teams of experts, so the university has become the hub for a network of institutions. It is collaboration with brilliant partners such as the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, the Bionic Eye Institute and the Royal Children's Hospital, among some many, that will make possible the next generation of research break-throughs.

This emerging model of shared projects is found in initiatives such as the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre, now under construction on Grattan Street. The consortium of a university, research institutes and hospitals will together provide the largest combined clinical and research cancer centre in Australia. It is an approach already pioneered through partnership with the Florey Neuroscience Institute and the Doherty Institute, which brings together Australia's preeminent immunologists.

This is the next evolution of a university, toward a model of co-production. Boundaries blur, staff work for the university *and* a research institute. Funding is shared, along with intellectual property and platform infrastructure, such as the new Victorian life sciences computer. The University of Melbourne spills beyond the gates to embrace whole precincts through deep and detailed partnerships.

From its origins as a controversial addition, research has become integral to our shared notion of what it means to be a university. We expect our teachers to be great researchers who themselves contribute to new knowledge and academic debate. We expect our students to acquire research skills during their undergraduate degrees.

This alteration has been slow, sometimes imperceptible. Research spent a century creeping from the margins to the centre of university life. Now it is shifting again before our eyes, so fast it can be a scramble to keep up.

Yet sometimes change can be a matter of choice.

Thus in 2005 the University of Melbourne asked an unexpected, awkward question: does it still make sense, after 150 years, to teach the professions as undergraduate programs?

In Australia, as in Britain, this challenges long-established practice. Students go straight from school into law or medicine, optometry or engineering, emerging qualified by their early twenties for a life of practice.

This approach has advantages. It keeps courses short and focused. It caters for a population long conditioned to see university principally as a pathway to professional life. It has, above all, the virtue of familiarity – this transition from school room to clinic seems the natural order of things.

So why contemplate change?

Because there are costs also to the Australian approach.

A higher education system dominated by undergraduate study narrows what can be taught in the final years of school, as students choose subjects with an eye to desirable university courses.

Undergraduate professional training limits the breadth available to university students, and so their opportunity to discover other ways of thinking and new areas of interest. Even those in a double degree program must sacrifice a portion of their non-specialist degree to accommodate professional accreditation requirements.

And in an era when many graduates aspire to work abroad for some of their career, Australian higher education sitting awkwardly with the dominant international university models of North America and Europe. In both, undergraduate courses are broader, with most professional education provided at graduate level.

Given Australian universities are kept afloat by income from international students, so compatibility with global trends matters. A program international in its focus offers an obvious advantage.

These issues formed the basis of a consultation process across the University of Melbourne during 2005, followed in December that year by a short strategy paper titled *Growing Esteem* – a paraphrase of the university’s motto *postera crescam laude*.¹

Growing Esteem proposed the purpose of a contemporary university be understood through the metaphor of a triple helix – three tightly woven strands of research, teaching and engagement. We research to contribute to the sum of human knowledge. We teach to share knowledge with a new generation, and we connect with a wider community through knowledge transfer – the partnerships, public lectures, collections, museums and galleries by which a university engages with its many publics. Each strand of the helix reinforces the others.

Growing Esteem offered idea about these three fundamental commitments, but most public attention focused on proposals around teaching and learning. Here *Growing Esteem* proposed the most far-reaching change to course structure and curriculum in the university’s history—indeed the single largest voluntary institutional change in Australian higher education.

¹ The use of ‘growing’ as an intransitive verb raised eyebrows among the university’s more enthusiastic grammarians.

This would become known in time as ‘the Melbourne Model’. The tag was not invented by the university but by *The Age*.

The Melbourne Model involved two big changes.

The first was to design afresh professional qualifications as masters-level programs. Here the university followed common practice in North American and the ‘3+2’ approach adopted by Europe through the Bologna Declaration.

The second and related change was to consolidate 96 existing undergraduate courses into just six undergraduate degrees. Undergraduate degrees would provide a firm foundation in the world of learning, with graduate study offering intensive and rewarding specialist qualifications.

Both changes involved significant risk, since students may not welcome the loss of direct entry to professional programs from school, nor the additional year required to complete an undergraduate and then graduate program.

Yet the university found the case compelling. A two cycle program could provide an undergraduate program of a quality with no precedent in this country. Students would then be older when choosing their professional degree, better able to handle courses offered with the intensity and pre-requisites expected at graduate level.

Growing Esteem set out principles, but the important work of undergraduate program design required a year-long Curriculum Commission. This was chaired with patience and skill by Provost Peter Peter McPhee, with a report adopted unanimously by the University’s Academic Board in September 2006.

The Melbourne Model began formally with the start of the 2008 academic year, a time of both celebration and anxiety. As we meet at the end of 2010, the first cohort of New Generation students will soon complete their undergraduate degrees and, early next year, begin graduate school.

Designing these new professional programs has provided an opportunity to think from first principles about the nature and purpose of university education.

For the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, the shift to a graduate approach has also allowed a new clinical model – classes held in schools, supervision by master teachers, in much the same way many health professionals are taught.

A clinical model also informs the Master of Nursing Science and Master of Social Work programs, both introduced in 2008 after extensive consultation with the professions, government and community groups. Each stresses the ability to work as part of an interdisciplinary team, since service delivery, like research, now relies on networks, drawing together experts around a shared problem. The Master of Social Work has received the rare accolade of professional accreditation in the United States.

This is more than reworking undergraduate programs – it is thinking again about curriculum and teaching. The Melbourne Scholl of Law introduced its first graduate law degree, the Juris Doctor in 2000, but started again with the beginning of the

Melbourne Model eight years later. Drawing on international models, the Law School capped classes at 60 students and emphasised cohort learning through group-work, shared assessment exercises and spaces to work together outside classes.

In turn the revised JD attracts students who expect to be challenged, are keen to learn, and often already hold postgraduate qualifications. Entry through the international Law School Admission Test ensures rigour in the selection of students, and sets high expectations for the classroom. I recall speaking with two law lecturers after the first year of the program. They described it as the hardest work of their professional lives – and the most rewarding.

Early evidence suggests a graduate approach has produced a more diverse group of students. This is not surprising. Breaking the link between Year 12 results and the professions provides greater opportunity for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The strong relationship between socio-economic standing and academic performance that marks school results diminishes at university. Underlying ability shines through undergraduate study, and can inform graduate entry.

However, though graduate entry may be more equitable, the Melbourne Model approach adds a year to university study, and this has cost implications for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Hence introduction of the Melbourne Model was predicated on the federal government allowing the university to offer Commonwealth-supported places in graduate schools. We were fortunate both sides of politics supported the transition, and the accumulated endowment of the university could allow significant expansion of scholarships and bursaries to students in need.

We make choices by deciding what to rule out. There is no single best way to provide a university education. Even the basic approach of three years of undergraduate education, followed by two or more of professional study, can be structured in a variety of modes.

For example, the Melbourne Model is often, though inaccurately, described as a United States-style general liberal arts degree. This was indeed an option considered, but eliminated for a number of reasons. Undergraduate study in the United States and Canada is a four year program, while Australian Arts and Science degrees are generally of three years duration. That extra year of study allows North American students to balance breadth subjects with an extended major in their area of interest.

In designing the Melbourne Model, the Curriculum Commission could not replicate this same balance of breadth and depth in only three years of study. Hence some measure of initial specialisation is inevitable. This logic informed the decision to offer not one but six undergraduate programs – Arts, Biomedicine, Commerce, Environments, Music and Science.

Each degree embraces shared education goals – capstone courses to bring together a major, compulsory breadth studies, research-infused teaching, and opportunities for knowledge exchange through local and international activities.

And each of the six New Generation degrees can work as a pathway to graduate education, either in research or a profession.

Though Melbourne did not adopt a single liberal arts degree for all students, the model draws on the North American practice of breadth as part of every undergraduate program. This encourages students to experience new ways of thinking about the world.

One unexpected result of compulsory breadth at Melbourne has been a sharp uptake in the study of languages – an increase of nearly 60 per cent in the number of undergraduates studying a foreign language, with striking growth in enrolments for Japanese, French, Chinese and Spanish.

Breadth has also encouraged teams of academics to collaborate on big subjects – cross-disciplinary programs around the challenges facing humanity. In 2011 some 26 University Breadth Subjects will be offered to undergraduates, from *Food for a Healthy Planet* to *Poetics of the Body*. There are subjects exploring race and social justice to subjects on critical thinking with data. *An Ecological History of Humanity* journeys through 150,000 years of human experience: the great migrations, health and disease, famine and plenty, war and peace, scientific and technological advance.

To encourage students to spend more time working together, the Melbourne Model has been accompanied by a roll-out of wireless connectivity across campus, new student IT systems, redesigned libraries and the refurbishment of numerous of academic buildings to provide study spaces for students and encouragement for group discussion.

And so we finish 2010 with our first cohort under the Melbourne Model poised to complete their undergraduate study, and a new world of graduate study beckoning

But all this is already old news. Why tell this story, again?

Because the inspiration for the Melbourne Model fits into a broader concern about diversity.

In higher education, Australians have long preferred uniformity – 37 public universities, all with similar profiles, teaching approaches and funding models. This has the merit of ensuring consistency across the sector, and easy choice for students. Since every institution is essentially the same, it is little wonder so few Australians travel interstate to study.

This tendency to sameness runs deep in the university sector. We have conditioned the Australian public to a single model of what it means to be a university.

The price of standardisation is loss of choice. Regardless of the institution they select, students get offered essentially the same education philosophy, through courses with similar curriculum and outcomes. Innovation is possible – new programs are copied across the sector with remarkable speed – but everything happens within the same inherited framework of undergraduate study.

Growing Esteem offers a vision for a distinctive contribution – to research, to teaching and to engage, binding these three together as a mission for Melbourne.

It seeks to do what all universities must – chart their own future, based on a distinctive vision about how knowledge should be organised and shared. The Melbourne Model works to offer meaningful choice to students interested in a broader education before committing to challenging professional studies.

The university has accepted from the outset that the Model will not appeal to all. Some students are wedded to undergraduate double degrees. Others only want to study veterinary science or engineering, and reject the prospect of a broader education. These views reflect long-standing Australian practice and must be respected. Some loss of students who would crave the security of a professional degree straight from school is an inevitable price of the Melbourne Model.

But those students who accept the risk, the rewards are great – in the quality of undergraduate education on offer, in the rigorous education and intense enthusiasm of the graduate programs.

‘University is all I hoped it would be’ one second year student told colleagues and I recently, as she weighted up whether to do a Masters of Architecture next, or follow at graduate level her new-found interest in urban planning.

The signs are encouraging. On standard indicators, the Melbourne Model has found a willing audience – demand for New Generation degrees is strong, entry scores have remained high, and retention among New Generation students is the best on record.

And if imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, institutions in Australia and overseas have adopted the Melbourne Model in part or whole. Last year alone, Parkville hosted over 600 delegations from other universities.

Yet it remains much too early to judge whether the Melbourne Model will achieve its ambitions.

The transformation to a long-term profile of half undergraduate and half graduate students will not be complete until 2014.

Even then, several cohorts of students must complete the journey from New Generation degree to graduate school before patterns will become clear in employment or student satisfaction outcomes.

And an important test will be whether the innovation survives a change of institutional leadership. A new management must eventually consider dispassionately whether the benefits of the Melbourne Model justify its continuation.

And, in any case, much will change between now and then. Major shifts in strategy may be rare, but incrementalism moves always amongst us.

The specific degree titles and subject areas adopted by the 2006 Curriculum Commission will not remain appropriate forever. In time the university may decide to continue consolidation, taking its six undergraduate degrees to just one or two, as some already propose. Others argue for four years of undergraduate study before specialisation.

Likewise the number of graduate programs will expand and contract, in response to the wider world. Research too will create new areas of professional study.

Hopefully, change at Melbourne will encourage other Australian universities to offer their own preferred mode of delivery, different degree structures, and contending philosophies of education. We serve our nation best through a competition of approaches. There need be no clear winner, only recognition that from diversity arises innovation.

The experience of *Growing Esteem* shows that an institution can decide to strike out in new directions, to challenge its own origins. In the nature of experiment, not everything new will work. Choice is risky.

But if we are to escape the bonds of our history and touch greatness, we must be willing to try. How else can we grow in the esteem of future generations?