

# THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY REVISITED

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It is an unexpected honour for me to be drawn from what Edward Gibbon (1980) would undoubtedly have styled 'the dull and deep potations' of retirement to participate in a celebration of the achievements of Nancy Millis, the more so as I am a stranger in the land of science. But Nancy, of course, has always been much more than a scientist, as I can personally attest from our rather lengthy time together, when she as University Chancellor was constrained for some fourteen years to share with me the vagaries of university governance and management and, as if this were not enough, to endure my strident protests against (what I perceived to be) the insidious transformation of universities from a scholarly to a largely functional role. And today I take the opportunity briefly to remind her, and you, of my continuing profound concerns, since such a transformation is likely to be accelerated if the government finds favour with the basic thrust of its recent review of higher education (Birrell and Edwards, 2009), a review aptly, if a little charitably, characterised by Michael Gallagher as 'a road map to mediocrity' (Gallagher, 2009). For in practical terms this review envisages in the next decade or so a massive increase in student numbers (enough, it has been estimated, to populate some 20 new universities) and in its egalitarian exuberance it quite omits to broach some very awkward issues. Thus

- it **fails** to countenance the inevitable decline in entry standards, not to speak of exit standards, that would surely be the concomitant of such expansion (surely a crucial matter, given the significant drop-out rates being experienced on current entry levels);

- it **fails** to explain the provenance of the army of qualified staff that would be demanded unless, of

course, existing staff are in the industrial vernacular that permeates university management to be compelled to greater 'productivity';

- it **fails** to explain the nature of, and source of funding for, appropriate buildings and infrastructure support in a sector already underfunded for current student loads; and, above all,

- it **fails** to countenance a structural reform which would facilitate the development of at least some institutions to transcend the basic needs of a functional role and to be internationally competitive in research and scholarship.

In short, it is (for me at any rate) the advocacy of an essentially flat and undiversified system, encompassing only educational supermarkets and allowing no luxury outlets, and thereby a recipe for gratuitous mediocrity and (in case there are economic rationalists present for whom quantity transcends quality) one whose banal 'relevance' may not for long remain palatable to international students, upon whose financial contributions Australian universities have acquired a dangerously high dependence.

I realise that such heretical comments may excite the belief that in asking me to speak the organisers have resurrected an academic dinosaur; and perhaps they have. But in my defence I feel bound to protest (as I have consistently for many years) that I strongly believe that the university sector should promote (and practise) schemes for the broadest possible access, and that much more needs to be done in this sphere. However, I do not equate broad access with broad and unqualified entry to a set of essentially undifferentiated institutions; rather, I see the need for a diversified hierarchy of universities, some of which should be highly competitive, research oriented, aca-

demically difficult of access and with a high proportion of postgraduate students (rather as, for example, in the USA or China). There is at present no shortage of advocates for the so-called 'level playing field' or for 'equality of opportunity' and my apprehension is that in the pursuit of such intrinsically estimable policies we are losing sight of the value and importance of maintaining and properly supporting at least some elite institutions which can engage in world class research, promote traditional fields of learning and research and, to borrow a phrase from Peter Goddard (the Director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton) facilitate the pursuit of 'disinterested scholarship' (Goddard, 2004). Other countries are managing to embrace the dichotomy of on the one hand support for broad participation in (numerous) institutions with strongly vocational missions and on the other hand the promotion of (a few) elite, research-oriented institutions – in China, for instance, a mere dozen or so elite institutions out of a total of some one thousand universities – and my concern is that Australia is shrinking from this important challenge.

In substantial measure, of course, the trend towards a functional role for universities has been facilitated by the advent of a multiplicity of professional and vocationally oriented programs, notably in fields of business, finance and health. In itself the introduction of such programs has brought welcome diversity, but what has been unwelcome has been the rapid expansion of such programs to a position of dominance so that (paradoxically) they are now serving to impair diversity by detruding, if not causing the demise of, many traditional fields of scholarship, which cannot meet a new and seductive criterion of 'relevance'. Time precludes a detailed examination of this process, but in crude terms two major catalysts are identifiable. Firstly, there is the predominant, and intelligible, desire of the ever-increasing student cohort to undertake work-related programs, this matching a naive, but overwhelming, view on the part of governments (and many others) that universities exist primarily to support the economy and to ensure a qualified workforce. Instances of this simplistic view abound. In the UK, for example, it finds explicit expression in the mission statement of the Higher Education Funding Council... "to promote and support productive interaction between universities and industry and commerce .... and to enhance the relevance of programmes of teaching and research to the needs of employers and the economy." And in

Australia it was not so long ago that a Minister asserted: - "Employers are sick and tired of graduates who cannot function in the workplace .... University funding should be linked to ensuring students .... are ready to go to work". Secondly, there is the decreasing likelihood that in a user-pay or partly user-pay system funding can readily be found for areas of low enrolment, however intrinsically significant, a problem likely to be still more acute if universities are to be funded on the basis of student demand. And, given general, uncritical attitudes towards higher education, it is risible to envisage a situation where the obvious antidote of public support for the seemingly 'irrelevant' is likely to be forthcoming. I would add that this trend can only be exacerbated further by the unrestrained recruitment of fee-paying international students, most of whom wish, or need, to pursue vocational or professional courses, and probably would not relish the prospect of their contributions being expended on other areas. It is my view that such pressures are driving universities inexorably towards a functional role, and it seems to me to be a tragedy that so little is being done to arrest this process and to assure the preservation of endangered areas of scholarship. This is emphatically not to deny that in the current environment, reflecting the new role of universities in society, a substantial portion of university programs should be professional or vocational; simply to argue for a sensible portion to be reserved for fields of less obvious practicality.

I may interpose as a sidelight that the growing predilection of governments effectively to impose a guiding hand upon research (in the supposed interests of relevance and economic worth) also favours functionalism. I cannot elaborate on this today but, as some light relief, I draw to your attention the satirical description of such research in *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift, 2001), where the hero is taken to the Grand Academy of Lagado to be introduced to government-sponsored researchers. His first encounter is with a scientist who has been working for eight years 'on a project for extracting sun-beams out of cucumbers, which were to be put into vials hermetically-sealed, and let out to warm the air in raw inclement summer'. Unsurprisingly, success had so far eluded this early incarnation of Lysenko, but he was confident that within a further eight years he might well obtain useful results. Thereafter, Gulliver relates, 'I went into another chamber, but was ready to hasten back, being almost overcome with a horrible stink... [the researcher here] was the most ancient student of the

Academy; his face and beard were of a pale yellow; his hands and clothes daubed with filth... his employment from his first coming into the Academy was an operation to reduce human excrement to its original food, by separating the several parts, removing the tincture which it receives from the gall, making the odour exhale, and scumming off the saliva. He had a weekly allowance .... of a vessel filled with human ordure'. Given that astronauts now regularly consume their (recycled) urine and given the present obsession with new ways of producing 'clean' energy, these exploits of the Grand Academy research team should not perhaps be considered as quite so fantastic as conceived by Jonathan Swift. Their applied nature in any event would almost certainly commend them to governments more readily than proposals for pure research.

But, to return to the rather more mundane theme of the drift towards functional universities, it must be acknowledged that sundry other academic dinosaurs exist and share my concerns over the changing nature of universities. However, a good many of them part company with me in seeking not a way forward but a return to the past and in only too often citing with reverence such anachronistic tracts as that of John Henry Newman (notably *The Idea of a University*, penned in the 1870s) (Newman, 1996). There could, I believe, be no greater mistake; and advocates of such nostalgia either have little understanding of the realities of those times, when universities were effectively on the periphery of society, or else have lost any grasp of current realities, where universities have been endowed with a central role. These nostalgists, as I shall style them, need to remember that just over a century ago universities in Britain (exemplars for institutions in many countries) were exceedingly narrow in their outlook and offered only a highly restricted set of subjects, notably Classics, which reigned supreme in the major universities in England, such as Oxford and Cambridge, until well into the twentieth century. In ca. 1870 there were in Oxford, for example, some 140 professors of Classics, as against fewer than half a dozen in Science; and as late as the 1960s the overwhelming majority of students studied Humanities. Staff in the supposedly golden age of Newman (and before) were largely indifferent to the needs of their students (the great historian, Edward Gibbon, asserts that he saw his tutor once only in eight months) many were unqualified, still more were appointed by blatant nepotism, and large numbers were habitual drunkards.

The aforementioned historian, Gibbon, who was briefly a student at Magdalen College, Oxford in the 1750s – a period which he stigmatised as “the most idle and unprofitable 14 months of my life” – wrote scathingly in his *Autobiography*: - “The greater part of the public professors had for these many years given up altogether even the pretence of teaching .... The fellows of my time were decent, easy men who supinely enjoyed the gifts of the founder .... From the toil of reading or thinking or writing they had absolved their conscience” (Gibbon, 1980). Readers of C.P. Snow will doubtless detect similarities some two centuries later in his characterisation of staff as doing little but engaging in drinking, feasting and the pursuit of intrigues - all without the distracting presence of students to deflect them from these important preoccupations (Snow 1972, 1998).

But, leaving aside these infelicities, universities like Oxford were effectively in the words of Gibbon “in the hands of the clergy, an order of men whose manners are remote from the present world” (Gibbon, 1980), and religion was a significant inhibitor of free speech, as, for example, the poet Shelley discovered when he was peremptorily expelled from Oxford for his tract entitled *On the Necessity of Atheism* (Shelley, 1993). Earlier Gibbon had converted to catholicism to secure expulsion from an Oxford that had been so lacking in academic stimulus, and rather later, in 1875, William Hardinge, an associate of Oscar Wilde, was also sent down for ‘keeping and reciting immoral poems’. It is within this highly restricted context that the work of Newman was written and it is little short of fantastic that so many who resile from the notion of a functional university vitiate their case by recourse to his narrow and anachronistic tract. For they are in effect offering as an alternative to functionalism an equally impoverished view, which quite disregards changes in society, the new position of universities in society and above all the broadening of access to universities beyond a wealthy elite. In this last regard the honest, if nauseating, remark of the writer Somerset Maugham as late as 1955 is revealing... “I am told that today rather more than 60% of the men [sic] who go to universities go on a government grant. This is a new class that has entered upon the scene.... They are scum” (Maugham, 1955). So much for the idealism of the nostalgists. Their predictions for a return to a Newmanite golden age are ridiculous in themselves, in that such a golden age is a product of their imagination, and quite irrelevant to modern times, where higher education should be

available to all on a basis of ability. The aim of those who wish to see the continuance of universities as genuine centres of learning rather than as factories for qualifications surely should be to continue on the path to maximum diversity initiated in Britain in the later nineteenth century by Thomas Huxley, and to increase the fields of study, not to eliminate the old in favour of the new. Huxley, of course, was faced with the situation where universities were dominated by a small number of subjects, especially Classics, and he argued fiercely for the introduction of more science subjects, but not at the expense of the traditional fields in the Humanities, which he believed should be expanded beyond the study of antiquity (Huxley 1969). He also argued for the introduction of Social Science. His advocacy eventually bore fruit, and after a slow start, and despite sporadic protests as late as the 1950s, universities in Britain diversified their programs dramatically, regularly adding new subjects without detriment to existing courses. From the 1970s diversity gained a whole new dimension more or less globally with the introduction of many vocational and professional programs. This was inevitable and it represented a welcome development for those who, like me, believe that universities should embrace, and enhance, all fields of human endeavour. As I have already remarked, the problem (for me) has been the subsequent failure to accept that these new fields, even if they are attractive to the majority of the greatly increased numbers of students, should simply have been additions to a rich menu and that they should not have brought with them a lingering death sentence for existing fields of less obvious or immediate relevance. In my view one of the greatest challenges facing universities today is to have rescinded this death sentence to their diversity and at the same time to mount a persuasive defence of the value of engaging in "the disinterested pursuit of knowledge". Given the large numbers of students and the understandable view of the majority that university education represents a passport for employment, the only realistic way of meeting this challenge is to promote within the sector the development of a small number of elite institutions, difficult of access for students and staff alike, committed to a diversity of programs that transcends the ephemerally relevant, and strongly oriented to and properly supported for research.

In 1959 C.P.Snow expressed his disappointment at what he regarded as the emergence of two cultures, asserting: - "I believe that the intellectual life of the

whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups .... literary intellectuals at one pole .... at the other scientists.... between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension" (Snow, 1998). And later in the same tract: - "traditionally highly educated people ... have been expressing their incredulity at the illiteracy of scientists. Once or twice I have been provoked and asked the company how many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The response was cold; it was also negative" (Snow, 1998). The current paradox is that the gulf between these two cultures has diminished (albeit almost certainly not to the extent that the *litterati* have any greater familiarity with the Laws of Thermodynamics) and the prospect beckons of both making common cause against the threat from a new culture, which embraces the applied, the professional and the vocational and which attracts support, much of it uncritical, because of its practical utility. The triumph of this new functional culture in universities would surely bring irreparable impoverishment to higher education and to society at large. It might even be the deadly midwife of a dystopia not unlike that outlined by Thomas Huxley's famous literary descendant, Aldous Huxley, in his *Brave New World* (Huxley, 2004).

I close by endorsing with enthusiasm the plaudits which have already been made by others on this occasion for Nancy Millis as a scholar, a scientist, an educator and much else. Her career and achievements will remain as an inspiration to us all.

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