Civic Responsibility Futures in Australian Higher Education

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Australia's higher education sector has traditionally and consistently provided excellent graduate standards of political, economic and corporate responsibility. It has not consistently produced graduates who are radical dissident reformers. The history of higher education in Australia is a story of practiced ambivalence and studied withdrawal. With the proposed changes to the way higher education will function, an opportunity exists to reform the higher education sector into a force not just for nation-building, but for deeper, more radical civic responsibility.

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Daniel Berrigan once proposed the question, "But how shall we educate men to goodness, to a sense of one another, to a love of truth? And more urgently, how shall we do this in a bad time?" (Wood 2002). It is debatable as to whether we are currently in a "bad time" in Australia, although the present attitudes towards asylum-seekers and those on the margins of life cast a pall over the bright image of Australian humanity that is presented by the federal government. At the same time however, there is a growing realisation that the true value of any society is in its local communities and it is the diversity and uniqueness of these communities which is being recognised and celebrated across all levels of society. For a nation still caught in the thrall of the rational economic revolution, there are emergent signs of an acceptance that capital comes in all forms - social as well as fiscal. Since legislating morality is both unappealing and an historical failure, for such an abstract notion to thrive in a contemporary western capitalist nation such as Australia, *civic responsibility* needs to be reinterpreted and fostered anew.

As the historical guardians of western civilisation and the self-proclaimed nurseries of social genius, institutes of higher education are uniquely placed to meet the needs of recasting civic responsibility for the changing world. In Australia, universities face the additional challenge of overcoming history. A history which has largely been a story of nation-building far more than of societal development. There is a strong theme running though Australia's tertiary education history that stands contrary to Sohail Inayatullah's claim (2000) that the primary function of the university is one of dissent. Australia's higher education sector has traditionally and consistently provided excellent standards of political, economic and corporate graduate responsibility. The effectiveness of those graduates, along with the effectiveness of the staff that made up the faculties, must be questioned however, when an assessment is made of their influence on radical change within Australian society.

Concepts of Civic Responsibility

Before progressing to an examination of this article's specific "civic responsibility" focus, consideration should be given to the generally accepted meaning of the term. This apparently simple task is made complex by the realisation that even within the English speaking world there are at least two dominant and assumed meanings. The civic responsibility of the English for example is a socio-political concept in which the upper

and upper middle classes demonstrate their responsibility towards the rest of society. It is in essence, an aristocratic ideal, best embodied by the French term *noblesse oblige*. In the new world however, the concept of civic responsibility is presumed to be within the purview of all men (and women). As all people stand equal before God, so too is their responsibility towards each other an apparently equal affair. This divergent notion of elite verses egalitarian civic responsibility has naturally lead to misunderstandings and varied interpretations on the subject.

Though the Dewey-inspired democratic revolution of universal education has won the day (Dewey 1916), in practice, Plato's elitist ideal of a rule by the most capable has never truly disappeared. The difference in twenty-first century Australia is that a meritocracy has already replaced the aristocracy - even though this has been a largely unchallenged and passive development. With the universalisation in education the general capacity for individual civic responsibility has risen. Education has meant the difference between obligation and responsibility. The one requires only unquestioning obedience, the other discernment and understanding.

The Four Types of Civic Responsibility

Quite aside from the question of historical perspective, there are other concerns regarding the accurate assessment of the effectiveness of one's civic responsibility. For the purposes of affording greater description and, therefore, assessment, the following is offered as an explanation. Regardless of whether one is referring to a person or collective, the civic responsibility of that entity is at the very least two-fold. There is a responsibility of the individual and the corporate responsibility. Within each of these distinctions exist another two layers.

Under the banner of the individual, consideration is given to the actions taken as an individual entity - this, we shall call the *Good Citizen*. The Good Citizen model of civic responsibility encompasses such things as littering, waste management, energy conservation and the like. The civically responsible Good Citizen is one who recognises that they are not alone and takes their place in society as one of many citizens, always with a mind to the fact that there are a finite number of resources and that one must do one's fair share of the general work. They have a mind to general civility and good manners and in the best of all possible worlds are understanding and tolerant of the differences of those citizens around them.

The second model under the banner of the individual, is the *Good Samaritan* model. This represents the active responsibility one has towards other individuals or entities. It embodies such concepts as the active sharing of resources, rendering assistance in times of need, and participation in group decision-making. Although the lines are already beginning to blur, it is necessary to identify this second model of civic responsibility mainly in order to be able to discover its absence.

The first model under the banner of the corporate, is the *Nation Builder*. This element of civic responsibility corresponds to the maintenance and well ordering of society. This is the respect for law and order; the development of the economy and the prosperity of society at large. The development of business and a focus on prosperity, security and health are the key focuses of this particular model.

The second model under the banner of the corporate, is the *Innovator*. This model is the least represented in society as it is the riskiest and least understood or respected. It represents the desire, or even need, to reform, innovate, challenge and dissent from society in order to recast a better system. This is not representative of small scale change, but of large scale radical reform. This model represents the ability and willingness of those who stand up and say "Wrong Way. Go Back!" Followed shortly by, "This is the way. Follow Me!"

For societies to survive, the first three of these models are required. For society to develop and progress rather than simply expand, specific support for the last of these models is needed most of all. Because education is the key to the new meritocratic standard, universities and their graduates are most uniquely equipped to meet this challenge. For the purposes of this article, the first three models are assumed to be a natural part of most citizens' experiences in a liberal democracy. It is the last, the Innovator model, that this article will mainly focus on. Sadly, it is the absence of this form of civic responsibility in the Australian experience that is its defining quality. Recent developments however are offering some hope for its future.

The Origins of Civilly Responsible Universities

The expectation that universities would be the guardians and advocates of civic responsibility emerged from the earliest scholastic bodies in Europe to claim that title. Falling ten years either side of AD1200 the universities at Bologna, Paris and Oxford were to form the blueprints for universities created in the western world (and beyond) to this day (Hyde

1988). After these original three, which had developed as communities in and of themselves from the guilds of the students and teachers, a number of other medieval universities began to spring up across Western Europe. Such early universities were heavily influenced by both the church and their perceptions of classical governments and were invariably arranged - in colleges at least - along sectarian lines. Regardless of the specific interpretations, it was the influence of the church and the teachings of Christ and Paul which informed the faculties and students of their obligations to the world around them.

These early universities tended to focus their curricula around a strong core of Theology, Philosophy, Classics and History. Indeed it was an acute awareness of the Christian obligation as shaped by such study, particularly the writings of Plato, which informed the university-educated of their separateness - a separateness which reinforced their privilege. Born out of a medieval time, the very structure of the university preserved this elitism for centuries, in some measure, even to the present day.

Only the nobility and the wealthiest of families could send their sons to a university in the time of the Renaissance, and later, the Enlightenment. The recipients of such a privileged education were made acutely aware of the responsibility this placed upon them. James Anthony Froude, the rector of St Andrews, best embodied this principle in his *Address to the Students* (1869). In it, he famously observed by quoting John Knox, "To make us know our duty and to do it, to make us upright in act and true in thought and word, is the aim of all instruction which deserves the name, the epitome of all purposes for which education exists."

The students were earmarked for leadership and governance from early childhood and all of their education had been tailored to that end. The role of the university in this was to finish their education by the development of the mind, the banishment of the wildness of youth and the hope of wisdom (Curzon 1902). Studies of the scriptures informed them of salvation, self-denial, order and forgiveness. The classics and history taught of courage, governance, greatness and tradition. And the contemplation of philosophy developed ethics, logic and societal understanding and invariably verified their own intellectual and moral superiority over those less fortunate.

The English Experience

England in particular made a virtue out of higher education and greatly revered the kind of man that it produced. This was not simply the prod-

uct of the university in isolation however. The English university system was heavily supported in its attempts to create men of "good character" by the public schools. Probably even more than on the continent, the British university was seen as finishing a man's moral, civil and scholarly education. Although the people attending such universities were from the landed aristocracy and the industrial rich, on the continent at least, most anyone who could afford it could attend. Indeed the original universities were known as *Stadium Generale*. General, not because of the general nature of the studies but because of the general admission to those who had been suitably prepared (Hyde 1988).

To illustrate the old world position on civic responsibility, printed below is an excerpt of a famous speech made by Benjamin Disraeli in the House of Commons on the subject of responsibility and democracy. Remarkably, because of the emphasis on the creation of men of character, the debate, as outlined by Disraeli in defence of the classical position, was not one of greater democracy and therefore greater responsibility but of either-or.

> *I think it is possible to increase the electoral body of the country by the introduction of voters upon principle in unison with the principles of the constitution, so that the suffrage should remain a privilege, and not a right - a privilege to be gained by virtue, by intelligence, by industry, by integrity, and to be exercised by the common good of the country. I think if you quit that ground - if you once admit that every man has a right to vote whom you cannot prove to be disqualified - you would change the character of the constitution, and you would change the manner which it will tend to lower the importance of the country. Between the scheme we brought forward and the measure brought forward by the honourable member for Leeds, and the inevitable conclusion which its principle supporters acknowledge it must lead to, it is a question between an aristocratic government in the proper sense of the term - that is, a government by the best men of all classes - and a democracy. (Disraeli 1865)*

Certainly, the development of "good character" - inseparably associated with "civic responsibility" - was considered to be at the core of what English public schooling (and higher education) was all about.

> *In England a boy is continuously exposed to these influences from morning till night. He is not only taught in the class-room, or the lecture-room, for*

brief periods at stated hours; his house-master, who is really responsible for his bringing up, is always teaching him too, teaching him not merely by tasks and lessons, but by watching and training his combined moral and intellectual growth. It is the house-master, far more than the class-master, that is, as a rule, responsible for the final shape in which the public school boy is turned out (Curzon 1902).

Australia's Peculiar Inheritance

In Australia, the question of the establishment of such preparatory schools was somewhat more problematic. Because of the divided nature of the populace along ethnic and sectarian lines, claims of religious elitism were rife. In 1837 Governor Franklin set about establishing such a preparatory school in the colony of New South Wales. As its headmaster he recruited an old boy from Rugby, one John Phillip Gell, who went about the task of creating Christ's College. It was intended to be a mirror of Rugby, developed and erected along Church of England lines as a shining beacon of morality and learning in the antipodes. The plan, which never came to fruition, ran into heavy opposition from Presbyterian and Catholic critics (Kociumbas 1992). This incident, and the founding of the secular university in London around the same time, meant that the road was clear for Australian universities to be purely secular bodies. While religious boarding schools were later founded, none would have the close ties with the universities that their English cousins enjoyed.

At the time of the University of London's founding in 1826 there were only two other universities in England. Even Scotland had four and the continent itself and the United States were becoming very much awash with centres of higher learning. In truth, it had been noted for some time that London was the only major European capital which did not host a university. While London University, had been specifically developed as an alternative to Oxford and Cambridge universities, it was not intended to be their rival as it was originally developed as a full fee private college. London was, it must be said, far more forward-looking in its dealings with students and staff and resembled continental universities far more than it did the two great English pillars. Neither staff nor students were required to be adherents to the Church of England faith - a compulsion which had kept Jews, Catholics and free thinkers from attending either Oxford or Cambridge (Rothblatt 1988).

By removing the trappings of the Church - or at the very least not talking about religion one way or another - the London College was severely limited in its ability to grant degrees. Eventually, in 1836 after a series of complicated manoeuvrings, the College was able to establish a system of teaching and limited research and then allow the parliamentary-sanctioned London University (a separate entity) to examine and confer degrees on its students. It was a largely effective system if somewhat morally unsatisfactory. As a result of the establishment of a workable conferral process the university grew and developed at a brisk pace. Its major clientele, aside from the previously mentioned religious outsiders to English society, were the middling classes or the middling rich. They were politically active, economically independent, dynamic and influential - all the more so for a first rate tertiary education (Rothblatt 1988). So successful was the university that it naturally served as a model for many years to come.

So it was that Australia would naturally emulate the London pattern. Intolerant of impractical attitudes and practices, the colonial Australians very quickly learnt to shun the pomp and ceremony so revered by the British. The teachings of the church likewise were seen to have little practical merit in the harsh land of Australia and so were paid little heed. Indeed this lack of regard for the salvic qualities espoused by the church had an early beginning in NSW when Captain Arthur Phillip at Botany Bay asked the Rev. Richard Johnson to forego the preaching of the forgiveness of the cross and to preach rather on ethical behaviour (Ward 1987). The good reverend, as an evangelical, was doubtless appalled but Philip had little time for such matters that did not immediately lead to the baking of bread or bricks.

Australia's Colonial Civic Influences

The Australian character, forged as much by the strained relationship with Britain as it was by the distance from her and the environment, was at once respectful of justice and ambivalent of law. It rejected authority but maintained the allegiance to the throne. The classic Australian stereotype was both the lone hero struggling to overcome the rigours of the bush and the "mate" who did his duty by his friends and his community. From *Clancy of the Overflow* and *The Man from Snowy River*, early Australian icons were not heavily educated "gentlemen" who were able fight a duel with sabres in the morning and discuss the works of Plato in the

afternoon. They were hard men who had little need for classical languages, British institutions or absent authority. It is in them though, that we see the beginnings of the modern meritocracy.

That development would yet be some time off however as Australia still had a sense of cultural and civil inferiority to Britain and invariably the majority of the ruling class came from that stock. Even at the turn of the twentieth century the captains of Australian civil society were of English breeding and schooling. The hold of the old world over the new was such that, by the judicial, industrial and political leaders, Australia was still thought of as having the potential to become a magnificent southern Britannia replete with all of the trappings and standards which that mother land embodied (Clarke 1962).

Such was the hold over Australia's decision-making elite of the English virtues and conventions, that they were seen as standards both to be upheld and aspired to by the next generation of native-born Australian leaders. Like all of history's best imperial masters, the colonising of Australia by the English did not stop at the land but included the mental colonisation of the Australian elites themselves - many of whom referred to England as "home" even though they had not once in their lives seen that small green island. English standards of morality and class, as well as beauty and landscape led to the swift and enduring belief that Australia was blighted by the Almighty. Harsh, unrelenting in its ruggedness and coloured not green but tan-brown with muted pinks and deep blues staining the mountains, Australia was looked upon by these English Australians as a land which God had perhaps made on the afternoon of the sixth day when he was beginning to tire (Clarke 1976). Such images for example, were so strong, when compared to desires of an idyllic English country grove, that Australia's "differentness" customarily manifested itself as a deep, but unspoken suspicion of national inferiority.

It is significant to note that Australian national leaders even as recently as Prime Minister Bob Hawke were educated at Oxford University. Indeed, it is even more significant to note that the bestowal of the Rhodes Scholarship which made such a finishing school possible for the one-time union boss was awarded not only on the grounds of good scholarship, but on traditional standards of good "British" citizenship. There has always been, and remains today, the feeling that one must make good overseas to be accorded the accolades of "real" success. From the national myths of the Australian soldiers at Anzac Cove to Phar Lap "beating the world" in America, the Australian seal of approval must be internationally counter-

signed for it to be truly legitimate. The same is true of public intellectuals, scientists and artists. Germaine Greer, Andy Thomas and Piers Lane each have carved for themselves remarkable careers, but each is accorded respect not just because they achieved success, but that it was achieved "overseas" - whether in Europe, America or England. The public assumption is almost as if making it in Australia is not enough because deep down Australia doesn't really match up to the rest of the world. The national experience, the lack of an upper class, and a deep-seated suspicion of inferiority - although not extending to sport - have combined to have a profound impact on the development and expectations of the place of higher education in Australian society.

From the early establishment of the universities in Sydney (1850) and Melbourne (1853), the Australian leadership, somewhat hesitantly at first, and then with growing confidence, as graduates took their places in the Australian bureaucratic, financial, political and manufacturing echelons, linked the development of the nation with the development of the universities. That these bodies were to be secular in nature and governance was, following the ill-fated Christ College idea, without question. Gradually each major city was to gain its own university and intended to reap the benefits of its presence and its graduates. These benefits, however, unlike the universities in Europe and Britain with their network of preparatory schools, were intended only to deliver practical benefits to the economy and the labour force rather than the development of character, manners or any idea of reforming society (Kingston 1988).

Alexander Gibson, Professor of Philosophy at Melbourne in the 1930s commented in the University's submission to the Murray Committee that it had been created as "an ornament of colonial society" and though its early professors had "sharpened the intellect and humanized the feelings" it had done so in a community which was largely unappreciative of such efforts (Poynter & Rasmussen 1996: 2). Even the contributions to society of graduates such as Alfred Deakin were hardly accorded the prestige with which such men in the United States of America were regarded (Blainey 1956). The meritocracy of the man on the land had little time for such niceties.

Civil engineering, architecture, plant biology, law, mathematics and medicine were only some of the disciplines which were both encouraged and sought-after in Australia. Anything that would assist the development of the nation and create an effective workforce. Labour-saving devices and ideas were particularly encouraged as this in some way made up for the labour shortages periodically experienced by Australian industry.

Indeed, industry and private enterprise were particularly interested in the kind of developments which Australian universities could provide. Classics were always offered at the original sandstone universities and in large numbers, but never revered in the same fashion that they were in England. Although it must be said that none of the traditional disciplines offered at Australian universities could truly be regarded as having been "revered."

Regardless of this, it is clear that while not developing a pure British civic-mindedness in their students and maintaining their academic integrity, these early universities could clearly be regarded as having met the criteria of equipping their graduates with the skills and know-how to govern and to be the nation's leaders. The civic responsibility of those nineteenth century Australian graduates, while not assuming the aristocratic posture of the English civic obligations of graduates, did arm them for nation building and economic management - thus setting the standard for the strong Nation Builder model of civic responsibility that Australian universities are still renowned for - even at the cost of undermining the development of the Innovator model. Indeed Australian graduates were far more likely to attempt to maintain than reform, and reform rather the revolutionise. The responsibility as a citizen to question one's leaders and take part in the grand debates of the day is poignantly absent from the majority of the universities' activities (Kingston 1988).

Even more clearly, it was seen as being rather silly to attempt to criticise the government or government policy when it was the self-same government which provided the monies for universities to exist at all in Australia. Numerous cases may be cited from the times before and during the World Wars when public dissent of any kind by academics was treated to swift and decisive responses (MacIntyre & Marginson 2000). Thus, one of the major functions of universities in Europe, America and Britain - to inform society and take an active role in debate - was largely overlooked in Australia. The implications for the university *in* Australian society were therefore moot. Effectively, the universities stood outside society and did not relish interaction with it. Sir David Derham, Vice Chancellor of Melbourne from 1968 to 1982 bluntly explained, "...its primary objective with respect to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of knowledge arises from a commitment *not to a local community*, nor to the State, nor to the nation but to the world (Poynter & Rasmussen 1996)." [My italics.]

Thus, sadly the grand civic questions of the World Wars period were ones that the universities largely failed to effectively involve themselves

in. In England, following Disraeli's failure to win his argument against democracy, it was seen as each subject's civic responsibility to cast a vote in the elections for the House of Commons. In Australia however, the introduction of "compulsory voting" (in the states between 1914 and 1942 and in Commonwealth elections in 1924), essentially removed the onus from the Australian and transformed the question from one of responsibility to one of law (Ward 1977). The universities played so minor a role in the public commentary on this core issue of civics that they hardly warrant a mention in the histories. This is true of preferential voting, conscription and the republicanism of the nineteenth century. For the second of these three issues, the print media and the Catholic Church played the major roles in public criticism and opposition debate. The universities were minor players indeed.

The Post-War Developments

The first major change to the participation of universities and their students (as opposed to graduates) in public life in Australia correlates closely with the massive expansion of university places and funding following the Second World War. Universities in the late 40s, the 50s and into the 60s became "lively" places of discussion and debate, despite the tide of fear and anti-communism which was sweeping the western world (Ward 1977).

If staff and students had in the past only occasionally exercised their privilege/right to speak out on matters of social and political import, the decades following WWII saw a marked improvement. Yet for all of this, the universities were still seen as assets of the nation rather than centres of learning, culture and research that brought the world to the community. In this they were held in as much esteem as any piece of infrastructure - like the National Highway System or the Snowy River Scheme. All were seen as important for the future of a small, growing and remote democratic country. The universities' role in this nation building was two-fold. First, to serve as the engine of innovation in the land and second to provide qualified men (and women) for service in government and industry.

In any event, the influx of people into the university system following the war, including the large numbers of ex-service personnel, saw the character of the universities change forever. No longer the remote ivory towers *of* the privileged and the advantaged, the Australian university increasingly came to be seen as an opportunity *for* advantage by all who

could attend. Then, and even more so now, a university education is seen as a ticket to better pay and better living standards.

Starting with the establishment of the Commonwealth Universities Commission in 1943 which greatly increased federal funding; through the Murray Committee and the Martin Committee in 1964, the amount of money which was delivered to the universities increased tremendously (Alexander 1973).

The Murray Committee was probably the most important review of universities ever conducted in Australia. The committee was appointed by Labor Prime Minister Ben Chifley just before his electoral defeat in 1949. Rather surprisingly, it was vigorously pursued by his successor, Liberal PM, Sir Robert Menzies. The Prime Minister eagerly endorsed just about everything that the committee recommended and was himself responsible in no small measure for the great expansion of post-graduate schools at the universities (Alexander 1973). Strikingly, the report states that the universities should be,

> *"...the guardians of intellectual standards, and intellectual integrity in the community. Scholars and scientists who spend their lives in the search for knowledge should, at least in their own spheres of inquiry, be proof against the waves of emotion and prejudice which make the ordinary man, and public opinion, subject from time to time to illusion and self-deceit. ... a good university is the best guarantee that mankind can have, that somebody, whatever the circumstances, will continue to seek the truth and to make it known. Any free country welcomes this and expects this service from its universities." (Murray Committee Report 1957)*

For the first time, and with the express sanction of the government, with the twin expansions of the university budgets and placements, faculty members and students began to raise their voices in public. At this time, there still seemed to be plenty of time down the track for students to worry about career paths and mortgages. These were the "golden years" of the Australian universities. They were the years when they were most prominently fulfilling their role as the nurseries of active civic responsibility in their graduates and in their vocal and intellectual engagements with society. Public debates, protests and activism were synonymous with universities and while the governing bodies of universities may have been less than impressed, civil society was at least seeing a return on the considerable investments which it had made.

Seeds of the Present

After the initial flurry of growth in the 1940s, 50s and early 60s, the universities suffered a period of stagnation into the early 1970s. This overall period also coincided with a continuous phase of economic growth in Australia and the rest of the first world. During this time the access to universities had been greatly increased by the Commonwealth Scholarship fund. Under the Whitlam government however, the university fees were abolished altogether and funding was again greatly increased (MacIntyre & Marginson 2000). The effect was dramatic. For the first time demand was somewhat comparable to supply in tertiary education places.

The Whitlam reforms seem to have made the dream of universally high standards of education a reality, but they had come at a cost. Disraeli's vision of a nation ruled by the "best men," wise, educated and scholarly, was only possible if, as he rightly surmised, democracy was to be resisted. In Australian universities, the democratic ideal of inclusive education had been realised at the cost of the benefits of exclusivity. Thus the earlier realist aspiration of a society delivering governorship to a group of particularly English platonic philosopher kings was replaced by the idealists' democratic wonderland in which education delivered the keys to a better life and responsibility was shared.

So it was with the cry of *noblese oblige* ringing ever more faintly in the ears of the university senates that John Dawkins became education minister and took the next logical step. If tertiary education should be accessible by all who are able to meet the criteria, why not roll all tertiary education bodies into the universities? The previous trend and public bias towards vocational studies and away from intellectual inquiry and research became official policy. Universities would be the engines of vocational training quality (Mann 1996). This change began to become visible with the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) under the Hawke Labor Government. The Scheme forced students to pay for the education in a deferred manner as they entered the workforce following graduation.

For the students, the re-introduction of fees, if generally deferred under Labour, and latterly applied "up-front" for some postgraduate studies under the Coalition, meant that they were less inclined to see their time at university as something for which they should be grateful. Further, the successive imposition of higher monetary costs on the students meant that it was even more imperative, from their perspective, to simply get in, get out and get a job. Nowhere in this equation does social or civic

responsibility, beyond that of the compliant, productive, nation builder, figure.

What became policy under Dawkins, later became *a priori* under Education Minister Amanda Vanstone. Universities were no longer even seen as investments, but as costs to be borne by the taxpayer with little or no perceived benefit to the voters. Catch-phrases such as "cost recovery" tended to faintly mask the shift in the university system from that of education and scholarship to instruction and service-provision. Budgets in real spending terms suffered enormously and standards dropped accordingly.

The Latest Developments

Today, the vast number of students and graduate students are less concerned about raising their voices and speaking to issues than they are about securing their future. Because they have come to see a tertiary education as a *right* rather than a *privilege*, there is little focus on anything past the personal advantage. The same is true for the young academic - they can no longer afford the luxury of political activism and dissent. When on contract, one tends to observe the time honoured Australian tradition of "keep your head down mate!" (Morton 1998) Yet during this otherwise melancholy time, against the backdrop of enhanced multiculturalism, aboriginal reconciliation and still another of this country's dalliances with republicanism, we are witnessing a strong revival of the notion of citizenship in the larger community (Marginson 1997).

The current "rush to community" being displayed by some universities suggests that the cultural revolutions wrought by the changes in university profile and population of the 40s through the 70s and the funding cuts and corporate culture of the universities in the 80s and 90s has practically forced an opportunity to come to terms with the university's natural constituency: the local community. This apparently new awareness of local communities involved a shift in attitude which removed the community from the exclusivity of the civic test tube and placed it more reasonably at the centre of the local civic reality of the university. In a very real sense, engagement with local communities can effect a re-humanization and a renewal of the university mission as global (truth), national (productive) and communal (civic). If we do not take this chance to re-evaluate the civic mission of the university in this country we will have squandered an opportunity to revitalise and re-apply the medieval con-

cept of the university in Australia's modern, and more egalitarian, society.

A Fork in the Road

With the new appointment of Dr. Brendan Nelson as Minister for Education, a sea-change has come to the area of higher education. Rather than continuing the process of equalising standards across the country and allowing universities to be all things to all students, the new focus is on specialisation and excellence. Rural and regional university campuses are being encouraged to engage their communities and to focus on their areas of specialty. The larger sandstone campuses are once again being asked to achieve world standing as top centres for research.

This development is occurring with one large roadblock. Although there is an encouragement from the education department to lift standards and shift focuses from the drift to a generally lower, but universal, education standard, there is no extra money to raise the standards again. Also, there is no incentive to lift entry standards to universities. Indeed, there is almost an opposite incentive as money is allocated on a per-student basis.

The latest development which may prove to either make or break any future notions of responsibility to society of both the universities and their graduates is the move by an emboldened Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee to press for universal up front fees on top of HECS (Illing 2002). The Minister has, at this stage, indicated his support for such a development. This fundamental shift in the way universities will be funded will cause either a deepening of the present malaise or a rebirth and reinterpretation of higher education's civic responsibility.

A Perilous (but unlikely) Future

The great majority of students currently view the HECS they need to pay for their education as something that is impinging on their *right* to free higher education. This is one of the main reasons why the so-called y-generation has seen the university only as a place where one goes to get a piece of paper on the way to a job and a better life. With the introduction of up front fees for undergraduate courses, this trend may be exacerbated.

Also, with the specialisation of universities we may see a reinforcement of the ivory tower principle where Australian universities return to

the bad old days of observing the world from the sidelines. Imperious, magnificent and all-knowing in their ambivalence. Strengthened by the monies rendered to them through pure market forces, they may become the factories of advantage that the recent reforms have threatened. Privileged beyond the access of all but the already wealthy and fortunate, they may become bodies that exist only for themselves and for their alumni.

Fortunately, the present conditions of this shift in policy will probably not allow this descent into self-indulgence. As has been previously observed, the community is now expecting more form all organizations when it comes to engaging the community. Universities are not immune from this expectation (Marginson 1997).

The Hope for the Future

For the university of today, the need to find alternative funding sources has tied it to certain outcomes which are unpalatable to those who value academic integrity. The provision of funds not tied to industry outcomes will liberate the university from this most unfortunate of binds. Since the federal government is not going to be forthcoming with any more funding, this is one of the only options which will set higher education free. It may also have the added bonus of emancipating it from the ties and binds of government funding, but that is another argument altogether.

With the new focus on specialisation, the universities will certainly arrange themselves into a tier system with the sandstones at the top and the newer regional campuses at the bottom. But this will not necessarily prove to be a bad thing. The tier system will only be relevant within the university system. The focus on specialisation will inform potential students as to where it would be best for them to study if they wish to pursue a particular career. Melbourne University after all is not as likely as the University of New England to focus its expertise on the agricultural sciences. UNE may be perceived to fall into the second tier of universities behind Melbourne, but it will still be a national leader in its own right.

How better to serve the community in which a university resides than to specialise in the needs of that community? The next step for governments, state as well as federal, is to tie certain funding measures to the encouragement of local councils to work with their universities and vice versa in order to achieve shared community outcomes. The civic responsibility of the university may be much better achieved if this, or a similar, course is pursued. If the history of higher education in Australia

has taught us anything, it is that innovation has been always hiding in the wings, all it usually needs is a small shove. Radical change is always present in the theories of university faculties, the opportunity to apply those theories rarely comes about. This may prove to be one of those opportunities.

For the students the prospect of paying extra for their education is never a savoury one. But the attitudes that currently grace the academic world are unhealthy for the long term well-being of the nation. A shift in the balance back towards Plato's vision of a more privileged education system, in which the students recognise their advantage, would hardly prove disadvantageous to society at large. This would still prove true even if numbers of students were to remain the same. In essence, this is the core of the issue. Modern democratic societies have tended towards the rights of the individual at the cost of the rights of society. The very nature of the debate, being as it is couched in terms of rights, is one that affects the eventual outcomes.

There is a fine balance between delivering democracy to all people for the betterment of society, and simply delivering rights to everyone. This indeed is the nature of active democracy - rights must be counterbalanced with responsibilities. At the present time in Australia, students are unaware of the value of their education and the gravitas of their position in society as one of the educated elites. That the term elite is now a dirty word does not in any way undermine the reality of this claim.

If the measure to increase funding to universities also assists students to see that their education comes at a cost, it is a price that will be worth the individual paying, particularly if the government sets up low cost student loan schemes. There would be inequalities within the system, naturally, but these could be ameliorated by the reintroduction of a national scholarship system.

The final step on the road to producing highly educated students, aware of their privileged position in society and willing to take part in that society, should be significant changes to the curriculum. Service learning, service research and service assessment are reforms that are essential to the undergraduate experience if students are to ever appreciate that their education is not just for themselves but for society as well. Once again, the specialisation of universities will help, rather than hinder this process as student placements will local industries will be far more easily facilitated.

This future, although by no means certain, is one which has the support of the community at large, newer faculty members, and even some

students. The opportunity to develop a civilly-minded higher education system is upon us. But the reforms are only half of the necessary changes however. Now that we are committed to this course of action, further changes are necessary to allay the university's fall into pure market-driven outcomes which will ignore civic responsibility at their long term peril.

A Hopeful Conclusion

It is important to have an open and democratic higher education system in a liberal democracy. But the main downfall of a system in which everyone is responsible is that in the end, nobody ends up taking responsibility. Plato may have been right after all when he asserted that some people must be trained to assume the role of decision-makers. The way his theories have been applied in the past however has been far too exclusive. The aristocracy of the old world has been a weight around the neck of each generation. The reforms instituted by Dewey though have brought with them their own form of weight. It too is a weight which we need to overcome if society is to progress as a whole. The past for Australian higher education has been largely one of only nation building, and in recent times, personal gain. As we enter the twenty-first century, a return to some limited form of elitism in each area of society may not necessarily be a bad thing if it is to prove to be for the betterment of us all.

Perhaps it is the medieval universities, those pillars of feudal responsibility and guardians of knowledge, that should have the last word on this issue. They might, if they could see what legacy their descendants may imperil as a result of submission to pure market forces and personal advantage, without the additional notion of personal responsibility, be concerned at the diminishment of scholastic and scientific sovereignty and be disappointed at the loss of higher education's civic responsibility. It is a future we must avoid if higher education is to stand for anything beyond its own personal gain.

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