

"Does Australia need Universities?"

By Daniel Perkovic

Introduction: Visions Ruptured by Reality?

The answer to such a question initially seems too obvious to elaborate on. Of course Australia needs universities, every society does; they are one of the “very few places in the world that can provide humans with the ability and the freedom to entertain thoughts and... to learn to question the world”.¹ For this aspect alone they should be seen as undeniably vital to every society. Why, then, is the question even able to be asked? Perhaps the answer lies in the disparity between this image of the university as the embodiment of potential human development and the stark realisation that “[t]he majority of students do not undertake university study for the sake of undertaking university study” but rather for the pursuit of a career.² From this there seems to be a severe rupture between humanist visions of the university’s vital nature and the financial realities which actually drive people to study in it. If such visions are just that, mere visions in juxtaposition to the concrete economic role the university plays in society, then perhaps Australia does not need universities. In this case it would only need a multitude of sophisticated skills training centers which facilitate the pursuit of individual careers and thus the perpetual growth of the economy. Such a position, however, would neglect the fact that universities make significant non-economic contributions to society which cannot be reduced to mere esoteric visions.

As such, I will argue that Australia needs universities not because of the economic benefits they provide, but because they function to maintain and reproduce the conditions under which democracy is able to exist within the country. The paper will engage with historical debates concerning the purpose of education and the changing roles and structures of the university. In doing so the aim is to illuminate the link

¹ Dario Toncich, *Study and Learning in the Australian University System* (Brighton: Chrystobel Engineering, 2008), p. 2.

² Toncich, *Study and Learning in the Australian University System*, p. 10.

between the democratic project and the university's critical role in contributing to it, thus proving its necessity to contemporary Australian society.

I. The Survival of "Special" Places and a *Bildung* Tradition

Kwiek has noted that "[t]raditionally, before market forces came into prominence, higher education in general, and the university in particular, were "special" places with teaching, research and their social service as the core of their mission."³ This observation, however, is misleading in that it suggests this perspective of the university has evaporated in contemporary society. On the contrary, the image of a university dedicated to these historical functions is still common and is actively projected by Australian institutions. For example, the University of Sydney recently described itself as "a research-intensive university" which aims "to do even more to contribute to the advancement of teaching and research in the national interest" while maintaining its "radical commitment to social transformation".⁴ There also remains the strong conviction that universities, and especially their humanities and social sciences faculties, should educate in order "to facilitate the development of creative, provocative and passionate thinkers who challenge those around them to do better and be better".⁵ Such sentiments echo historical formulations of the purpose of university education including the Kantian notion of *Bildung*: that education should result in the individual's "emergence from [their] self-imposed immaturity" in the sense that they will "[h]ave

³ Marek Kwiek, *The University and the State: A Study into Global Transformations* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Scientific Publishers, 2006), pp. 52-3.

⁴ The University of Sydney, *The University of Sydney 2011-2015 Green Paper*, <http://sydney.edu.au/about/strategy/green_paper/green-paper-whole.pdf>, viewed 27 June 2010, pp. 5-10.

Throughout the paper I will draw most of the primary evidence from University of Sydney sources. Although I acknowledge the problematic nature of generalising about other institutions on the basis of one particularly situated university, I also believe it is useful to focus on one single institution as a case study in order to draw out the internal logic of its discourse from which wider trends can then be deduced. I believe my proximity to the University of Sydney is beneficial to this task.

⁵ Tara Brabazon, *The University of Google: Education in the (Post) Information Age* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007), p. 10.

courage to use [their] own understanding!" and "use reason publicly in all matters" so as to actively resist any "pervasive restrictions on freedom".⁶

This perspective and its emphasis on the primacy of the personal, social and moral development of the individual is still prevalent in university discourse to the extent that every year it is reiterated in order to persuade students of the value of an education in humanities. For instance, it "is more than just a means of fitting you for the demands of a career"; it

seeks to develop new horizons for all its students, to help them achieve their potential as productive, fulfilled, creative, imaginative, tolerant and useful citizens. We believe that what you learn here will stand you in good stead for the rest of your lives, not just your working lives.⁷

As such, Kant's concern that "docile creatures will not take a single step without the go-cart to which they are harnessed"⁸ still seems to be addressed by the modern university with its promise to develop autonomous individuals through its values of "Liberation, persistence and courage".⁹ This leads me to the first reason why I believe Australia needs universities: through their commitment to developing students, not only in the narrow sense of skills training but also in the wider sense of producing independent individuals with critical faculties, they directly improve the lives of those students while simultaneously contributing to the formation of more cohesive, interconnected and tolerant communities. Thus the continued pursuit of the *Bildung* project is not only justified by its own dedication to the critical education of the individual, but also in the potential benefits this education holds for wider society. Such benefits may include increased "nation building and development of leadership, democratic participation,

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? (1784)*, <<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/kant.html>>, viewed 2 July 2010.

⁷ Professor Duncan Ivison, 'Message from the Dean' in the University of Sydney's *Faculty of Arts Undergraduate Handbook 2010*, p. 1.

⁸ Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? (1784)*, <<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/kant.html>>

⁹ The University of Sydney, *Objective and Values*, <<http://www.usyd.edu.au/about/profile/values.shtml>>, viewed 3 July 2010.

increased consensus, a perception that society is based on fairness and opportunity for all citizens, social mobility, greater social cohesion and reduced crime rates".¹⁰

II. Deeper Conflicts: Emancipation and Optimisation

Despite this apparent continuity between traditional and contemporary conceptions of the purpose of university education, closer inspection of the self-legitimising rhetoric of the university may betray a deeper conflict between its historical social functions and present economic demands. For example, while great pains are made to emphasise the non-economic value of an education in humanities, it seems impossible to speak of addressing "global poverty, war, climate change, the ethical responsibilities of corporations, or fundamental questions about the happiness of human beings" without also speaking of "the skills that employers are seeking in all their workers... precisely the talents you will develop in undertaking your studies in the Faculty of Arts."¹¹ The very fact that the *value* of education is emphasised, let alone personal financial value, seems to demonstrate Lyotard's point that

The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – that is, the form of value.¹²

By this I do not mean to suggest that the purpose of education has become finally reductive to its economic utility despite any other pretenses. Rather, the fact that language which appeals to financial usefulness seems paradoxically inextricable from the proud independence of humanities rhetoric is reflective of the double game universities must now play when projecting images of their goals and purposes. In other words, universities now face "the requirement to reconcile potentially conflicting education-as-trade and educational-as-knowledge-sharing efforts operationally and

¹⁰ Kwiek, *The University and the State*, pp. 52-3.

¹¹ Ivison, 'Message from the Dean', p. 1.

¹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 4.

strategically”.¹³ This problematic situation has been explicitly acknowledged by the University of Sydney:

On the one hand there has been widespread recognition... of the crucial importance of universities in training the future workforce, undertaking research of significant national benefit and latterly of the contribution of higher education to economic growth. On the other hand there has been widespread impatience with the supposed ‘esoteric’ and non-commercial aspects of university research, a sense that academics are not working hard enough, *a belief that universities need to operate more as businesses and be more responsive to the market, and yet a suspicion that if they become too business-like, public priorities might be ignored.*¹⁴ [emphasis added]

In Lyotardian terms, this admission of the conflict between the university’s “public priorities” and its status as a “business” which contributes to economic growth may be seen as a reflection of the wider conflict between the legitimisation narratives of emancipation and optimisation. In the former, knowledge either finds its validity in an external “practical subject—humanity” and the devotion to its Freedom, or within itself through the devotion to Truth; both are emancipatory in the sense that they resist tyranny and falsehood respectively.¹⁵ In the latter, the validity of knowledge is no longer “defined by other criteria [including] true/false, just/unjust”, but rather by its practical utility; “Is it efficient?” replaces “Is it true?” as the yardstick of validity.¹⁶ Yet rather than the optimisation narrative completely replacing the emancipation narrative within the contemporary university, institutions must be seen to be appealing to both narratives simultaneously if they are to remain valid. They must maintain their commitment *Bildung* values and social transformation while also providing “the skills and competences necessary to flourish in emergent knowledge-based societies” and working “on the cutting edge of sciences [to] bring technological innovations to the

¹³ Yvone Turner and Sue Robson, *Internationalizing the University* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), p. 6.

¹⁴ The University of Sydney, *The University of Sydney 2011-2015 Green Paper*, <http://sydney.edu.au/about/strategy/green_paper/green-paper-whole.pdf>, pp. 19-20.

¹⁵ Lyotard in Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (London: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 43-5.

¹⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 51

production process”.¹⁷ Without the former commitment higher education institutions would be nothing more than facilities for skills training devoid of sociocultural projects, yet without the latter they may be attacked for being “esoteric” and useless outside of themselves. This double bind means that “Liberation, persistence and courage” must sit comfortably together with “Ingenuity, transformation and opportunity” as it does on the University of Sydney’s “objective and values” webpage.¹⁸

On one hand, this dualism in the self-legitimizing rhetoric of the university may be seen as a highly positive development in that institutions may simultaneously maintain their sociocultural commitments while also dedicating significant energy to economic projects thus leading to a situation where “[t]he potential benefits from higher education can be viewed as private and public (and both can be either economic or social).”¹⁹ For example, continued dedication to social projects (*emancipation*) could result in the “improved quality of life for self and children, better decision-making, improved personal status, increased educational opportunities, healthier lifestyle and higher life expectancy” in the private sphere as well as greater democratic involvement and community consensus Publicly.²⁰ At the same time, dedication to economic projects (*optimisation*) could result in “higher salaries, better employment, higher savings, improved working conditions and personal and professional mobility” in the private sphere.²¹ Publicly it could also result in “greater productivity, national and regional development, reduced reliance on government financial support, increased consumption, and increased potential for transformations from low-skilled industrial to knowledge-based economies”.²²

On the other hand, however, this dualistic approach to the pursuit of interests in different spheres (social/economic, public/private, emancipation/optimisation) may lead to a situation whereby different components of the university including its faculties, staff and students become divided along the lines of their focus on one set of

¹⁷ Kwiek, *The University and the State*, pp. 161-2.

¹⁸ The University of Sydney, *Objective and Values*, <<http://www.usyd.edu.au/about/profile/values.shtml>>.

¹⁹ Kwiek, *The University and the State*, pp. 52-3

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

spheres or another. Although the university may attempt to redress such separations by offering a range of courses which utilise “a broad multi-disciplinary approach” to study,²³ there is still the real threat of what Said describes as academic “noninterference”.²⁴ This is when staff and students assume a “strict professionalism” and dedicate themselves only to their own (often narrow) fields of study while remaining “silent on the large questions of social, economic, and foreign policy” and democracy in general.²⁵ In terms of the humanities this may translate into a laissez-faire attitude whereby “‘they’ can run the country, we will explicate Wordsworth and Schlegel”, thus signaling the relinquishment of any political engagement with contemporary society and proving “the marginality of scholarship that is premised on its own harmless social obsolescence.”²⁶

III. Reformulation: Committing the University to Democracy

Australia does not need universities if they assume this attitude of separatism from the world. This would be tantamount to a complete rejection of the emancipation project; skills training institutions (perhaps still nominally referred to as universities) would be sufficient to pursue the optimisation project in isolation. If, however, universities aspire to a socialising function which prepares individuals “for civic engagement or democratic participation” and “for participation in the community as citizens of a democracy”²⁷ then they may be seen as necessary. This is not because universities contain some intrinsic or essential value that society could not survive without, but rather because if certain principles are valued in Australian society (be they Freedom, Democracy, Egalitarianism, Justice, etc.), then universities may be seen as necessary to the maintenance, reproduction and dissemination of those values within the community so long as they are committed to their socialising/emancipation projects. In this way I would posit the university as fulfilling Habermas’ vision of

²³ The University of Sydney, *Bachelor of Political, Economic and Social Sciences - B.P.E.S.S.* <http://www.usyd.edu.au/courses/?detail=1&course_sef_id=Bachelor_of_Political_Economic_and_Social_Sciences_1314>, viewed 7 July 2010.

²⁴ Edward Said, ‘Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community’ in *Reflections on Exile: And Other and Cultural Essays* (London: Granata Publications, 2001), p. 144.

²⁵ Said, ‘Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community’, p. 145.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 144.

²⁷ Frank Newman in Kwiek, *The University and the State*, p. 54-5.

the communication community of those affected, who as participants in a particular discourse test the validity claims of norms and, to the extent that they accept them with reasons, arrive at the conviction that in the given circumstances the proposed norms are ‘right’”.²⁸

As such, rather than seeing any non-commercial aspects of university research as “esoteric” and blaming institutions for not working hard enough because they do not directly contribute to economic growth, they should be seen as contributing to the constant process of “moral deliberation and democratic will formation”²⁹ in which “the communication community” constantly (re)evaluates its values through consensus and then applies them in the public sphere. In this way universities may be seen as necessary not only for their role of socialising individuals for participation in the community as citizens of a democracy, but in maintaining the very technologies or processes by which democracy is able to continually exist. It follows that although the (uneasy) coexistence of the emancipation/optimisation narratives within university rhetoric and structure may prove to be an enduring feature of its figuration into the future, there must still remain the strong principle that

the university needs to be understood as engaged in forms of individual and collective development that cannot be captured in economic terms. Education cannot pay in this way. It must not be expected to... [Universities] cannot function properly as capitalist institutions. Their work of labor-intensive, craft-based creation and teaching is noncapitalist. Since capitalism will continue to insist on bottom-line measures of their output, universities will at those times need to be frankly anticapitalist.³⁰

Yet in positing the university this way, that is, as the bastion of Democracy and Consensual Values in the face of Capitalism’s insatiable pursuit of Use Value and Profit, I may have fallen victim to a binary image which is “the unacceptable remnant of a “totalizing” philosophical tradition”, one which only achieves “the valorization of

²⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 105.

²⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 27.

³⁰ Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University*, pp. 272-3.

conformist, when not “terrorist”, ideas of consensus.”³¹ This criticism that consensus belies the terroristic function of forcing individuals to oblige totalising narratives, however, naturally equates difference with disagreement. Although “the idea of a multiplicity or of a diversity” as a sociopolitical model is definitely a positive progression from class or mass based models,³² to argue that consensus formation is coercive and counterintuitive to such multiplicity is to place the individual in a social vacuum where they cannot interact with their Others except disruptively or through individual “skirmishes that take place on the sidelines”;³³ collective action or agreement seem impossible in such a space. As such, I would argue that this model’s conception of political freedom is misconceived in that it neglects the role of the public, the collective, and the Other in originally establishing freedom. As Arendt puts it:

Freedom needed, in addition to mere liberation, the company of other men who were in the same state, and it needed a common public space to meet them—a politically organized world, in other words, into which each of the free men could insert himself by word and deed.³⁴

In contemporary Australian society the university may be seen to fulfill these functions through its provision of a public space in which individuals can act and interact in plurality thus proving that “[w]e first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves”.³⁵ Following from this realisation, I would argue that another reason Australia needs universities is because they facilitate political freedom, and thereby democracy, by providing spaces in which public actions can be performed simultaneously by a multiplicity of individuals. That is not to say that political freedom or democracy could not survive without universities, but if a condition higher than mere survival is desired then they are necessary in maintaining robust political systems through their dedication to plurality and public participation.

³¹ Frederic Jameson, ‘Foreword’ in Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. x.

³² Best and Kellner in Glenn Ward, *Postmodernism* (London: Hodder Headline Ltd., 2003), p. 181.

³³ Lyotard in Ward, *Postmodernism*, p. 176.

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, ‘What is Freedom?’ in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1993), p. 148.

³⁵ Arendt, ‘What is Freedom?’, p. 148.

Such a goal, however, is dependent on more than just the existence of functioning universities; the constant reproduction of a healthy democratic society, that is, a resilient and tolerant one which pursues egalitarianism and justice, requires the constant action of individuals who pursue that same condition in themselves and those same goals in everyday life. Although universities provide an ideal space for such action to occur, the aim should not be to manufacture a clique of professionals or hyper-literate acolytes of obscure discourses who pursue these goals on the behalf of the majority. Rather, the objective should be, as Habermas envisaged, the realignment of the spheres of ethics, science and art and thus their extrication from the experts and professionals who currently monopolise them in order to make them accessible to the wider community.³⁶ This position is reiterated by Said when he encourages a politics of “interference” whereby “[i]nstead of noninterference and specialization, there must be interference, a crossing of borders and obstacles, a determined attempt to generalize exactly at those points where generalizations seem impossible to make.”³⁷ Not only this, but despite their frequent characterisation as natural enemies, Habermas’ vision may also be seen as strikingly reminiscent of Lyotard’s notion of the “resubordination of economic production to cultural knowledge” whereby “[t]he result would be, once again, a culturally based capability of self-management, one at least partially freed from external coercion. The source would be a recovered relation between scientific and cultural knowledge”.³⁸ In other words, this is the championing of the emancipation narrative, albeit a modified one that accounts for multiplicity as well as its necessary coexistence with the optimisation narrative, rather than the declaration of its final obsolescence.

Conclusion:

As such, I have attempted to argue for the necessity of universities in Australia along these same lines, that is, in acknowledgement of the continued relevance of Emancipation as a real and obtainable goal and the university’s role in pursuing this goal, though reconfigured in the form of a contemporary democratic discourse which

³⁶ Habermas in Ward, *Postmodernism*, p. 179.

³⁷ Said, ‘Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community’, p. 145.

³⁸ Lyotard paraphrased in Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University*, pp. 43-5.

recognises sociocultural plurality. Through this structure I have argued that Australia needs universities because:

(i) Through their commitment to developing students, not only in the narrow sense of skills training but also in the wider sense of producing independent individuals with critical faculties, they directly improve the lives of those students while simultaneously contributing to the formation of more cohesive, interconnected and tolerant communities.

(ii) They provide a socialising function which prepares individuals “for civic engagement or democratic participation” and “for participation in the community as citizens of a democracy”.

(iii) They contribute to the constant process of “moral deliberation and democratic will formation” in which “the communication community” constantly (re)evaluates its values through consensus and then applies them in the public sphere. They are thus vital in maintaining the technologies and processes by which democracy is able to continually exist.

(iv) They facilitate political freedom, and thereby democracy, by providing spaces in which public actions can be performed simultaneously by a multiplicity of individuals.

In arguing these points I have employed a variety of frameworks, some of which may initially seem to be contradictory or unrelated, including Kant’s notion of *Bildung*, Lyotard’s description of emancipation/optimisation narratives, Said’s account of the threat of “noninterference” and the role of “interference”, Arendt’s conception of public political freedom and plurality, and Habermas’ vision of consensus and “the communication community”. In attempting to reify and reconcile these concepts, however, I hope to have demonstrated the necessity universities to Australia, not only as engines of economic growth which they undoubtedly are, but perhaps more

importantly as institutions which fundamentally maintain and reproduce the very social fabric upon which the interactions of its individuals takes place.

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