A new generation of planners

The Dawkins revolution

In July 1987, nearly six months before Karmel was due to retire as Vice-Chancellor, the Hawke Labor government was re-elected for a third term. The new government proceeded to reorganise the public service into a smaller number of ‘mega-departments’, each presided over by a Cabinet minister. The former Department of Education was subsumed within a new Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), a name which in itself suggested a major element of government policy: education policies should be closely linked with the restructuring of the workforce.

The Minister for Employment, Education and Training was John Dawkins, a 40-year-old Western Australian who had previously served as Minister for Finance and Minister for Trade. Dawkins had been educated at Roseworthy Agricultural College in South Australia and the University of Western Australia, and he was scornful of the teaching standards he had encountered. He believed that the higher education system was desperately in need of change; and while he as yet had no detailed plan for bringing change about, he was determined, as he put it, ‘to shake the tree vigorously’.

Few people at the ANU knew much about what Dawkins had in store. One of the first to find out was Don Aitkin, who had by chance delivered a speech on ‘Education and national needs’ a few days after the new ministry had been announced. The address, appropriately called the Copland Memorial Lecture and delivered at Copland College, one of Canberra’s senior high schools, was prescient. Aitkin urged the universities to seize the initiative and begin to determine their own future. ‘They have the intellectual resources to do it, and no-one else will do it as well. Moreover, if they do not take the opportunity now they will not only miss the possibilities for growth that are coming, but they risk having an exasperated government doing some bush surgery on them.’

Shortly afterwards, Aitkin met Dawkins, supposedly to discuss the Australian Research Grants Committee of which he was chairman. Dawkins wanted to talk about the speech, and he outlined some of his own ideas for higher education and research. Aitkin, subjected to an ‘inquisitorial session’ such as he had never encountered before, was impressed. Dawkins was ‘informed and opinionated’ about higher education, ‘self-confident, and gifted with an excellent intellect and great powers of concentration’. He was also, like Aitkin, impatient for change. The system needed radical surgery.

Dawkins’ reform proposals were developed quickly and set out in a Green (discussion) Paper in December 1987 and a White (policy) Paper the following July. According to Peter Karmel, the government’s strategy encompassed ‘the most drastic changes to arrangements for higher education that have occurred in the 140 years since the
foundation of Australia’s first university’. Key features included the abolition of the binary system of universities and colleges of advanced education that had been introduced in the 1960s, and its replacement by a ‘unified national system’, comprising fewer institutions, each with a minimum number of students; and the introduction of ‘educational profiles’, which required each institution to provide the government with details of its teaching and research objectives and activities in order to justify continued funding. By these and other means, Dawkins aimed to give higher education a clear sense of direction, to reshape it as an instrument of government economic policy, to increase access, and to make the universities more open, more accountable for the huge sums of public money invested in them, and more receptive to the marketplace and to national needs.

The emphasis on national needs recalled the purposes for which the ANU had been founded. That much Dawkins had in common with Coombs and his colleagues in the mid-1940s. He also shared with the earlier generation of planners an understanding that central government could play a creative role in formulating institutional structures for higher education. Beyond that, the differences were more substantial than the similarities. Dawkins conceived national needs in economic terms, largely ignoring the cultural role that had traditionally been associated with universities. Where the post-war planners had sought to build on centuries of tradition, and had looked to overseas universities to show them the way, Dawkins seemed to prefer demolition and building anew. As Karmel put it, the Green and White Papers showed ‘limited understanding of the institutions and no great respect for them, their staff or their work’.

Some academics, especially in the colleges of advanced education, welcomed the proposed changes as promising to revitalise what they saw as a moribund system. Many more were hostile, rejecting as Orwellian the whole notion of a unified national system. Some remarked that the reforms were ‘right on diagnosis’ but ‘wrong on remedy’. The most intensive public discussion of the Green Paper took place at a seminar convened by the Research School of Social Sciences and the Academy of Social Sciences, where the overall tone of comments was severely critical (with Aitkin lamenting that his colleagues had got it wrong).

In the eyes of their opponents, the most offensive element of the proposals was the threat to university autonomy. While the White Paper talked about educational profiles as ‘a mechanism to balance the freedom of institutions to manage their own affairs with the need for improved public accountability’, the Minister, by his statements and actions, left no doubt that he intended an unprecedented degree of intervention in the day to day affairs of universities. Shortly before the Green Paper appeared, Dawkins abolished the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission which, together with its predecessor the Australian Universities Commission, had kept governments at arm’s length for 30 years. The body that replaced it, the National Board of Employment, Education and Training, was strictly advisory. This left the formulation and implementation of policy in the hands of Dawkins, who remained in charge of the portfolio until 1991; Peter Baldwin, the junior Minister in charge of Higher Education from 1990; and their departmental officials.

Although the White Paper denied that government had a role in dictating management structures to institutions, it rode roughshod over traditional concepts of
collegial government, drawing links between universities and large businesses and urging them to achieve ‘strong managerial modes of operation’. Governing bodies were to be smaller; and they were to delegate ‘clear responsibility and authority to their Chief Executive Officers to implement agreements reached with the Commonwealth, and to hold them responsible for that implementation’. This hastened the movement towards a system of industrial relations where vice-chancellors and senior administrators were perceived as ‘management’, and academics as ‘staff’.

Karmel had urged better management and stronger leadership, but this was going much further than he had ever intended. In any case, he was now retired as Vice-Chancellor, although he remained prominent in several other organisations and as an astute and constructive critic of the government’s education policies. His successor was Laurie Nichol, whose appointment was formally announced in July 1987, the day before Australians voted to return the Hawke government to office.

The choice of Nichol may be seen as an assertion by the University, through its selection committee, that the tradition of collegial government should be upheld. Born in Adelaide, educated at Adelaide University, and now in his early fifties, Nichol had been a member of the John Curtin School for many years, as a research fellow in the mid-1960s, then as Professor of Physical Biochemistry from 1971 to 1983. During that time he had been active on University committees, especially the Board of the Institute (BIAS), where he had won a reputation as an able chairman, mild mannered and gently spoken, with a fine grasp of detail and a commitment to fair play. When he was asked whether he was prepared to be considered for the position of vice-chancellor, he was currently Vice-Chancellor of the University of New England in Armidale, NSW.

One of the other candidates was Aitkin, who had succeeded him as chair of BIAS and whose views and style were well known. Where Nichol was a successful exponent of collegial government, Aitkin was an unashamed supporter of structures that were more managerial and a firm believer in decisive leadership. Members of BIAS had become increasingly restive as he led them along paths they were reluctant to take. Nichol was safe; Aitkin was risky, with a style that was perhaps too slick for some of his colleagues’ tastes. Aitkin interpreted the choice as a decisive rejection of his own analysis of the University’s problems and his proposals for the future: ‘My reading of the decision was that a significant group within the Council, as well as within the University, seemed unconvinced that real change was necessary’. Looking elsewhere for challenges, he soon found them when Dawkins asked him to chair the new Australian Research Council, which replaced the

Australian Research Grants Committee. He later became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra, several kilometres out of town, where he reflected with frequent astonishment on his old University while working to create a new one.

In the meantime, Nichol had to lead the ANU through what was perhaps the most difficult period of its career. Dawkins and Baldwin inflicted pain throughout the University and left scars that would take many years to heal. In the short term, the deepest wounds were caused by the abortive attempt to force a merger with the Canberra College of Advanced Education (the future University of Canberra). Then there was a review of the Institute which recommended that responsibility for funding the John Curtin School should be transferred to the National Health and Medical Research Council. This was followed by another review which recommended that The Faculties should be separated from the ANU and merged with the University of Canberra.

As academics throughout Australia realised the implications of the revolution, their responses became more strident. ANU staff were often at the forefront of the public opposition. In August 1988, Eugene Kamenka, John Mulvaney and senior colleagues in the humanities throughout the country wrote to the press deploring the Green Paper’s view of higher education as ‘a commodity that can be produced and made to order and sold’. In 1991 Barry Rolfe, Professor of Plant Molecular Biology in the Research School of Biological Sciences, organised a national advertising campaign severely critical of Dawkins’ reforms and galvanising support among the academic community at large. Barry Ninham, Professor of Applied Mathematics in the Research School of Physical Sciences and Engineering, fulminated in the press about ‘the damage caused by the idiotic policies of feral bureausaurs ... masquerading as so-called rational economists’.

The changes initiated by Dawkins gradually altered the shape and ethos of the University. A new Act of Parliament, passed in 1991, reduced the size of Council from 44 to 23, with fewer representatives of the University community. The administration became more overtly managerial, and more subject to externally initiated reviews of its efficiency and more susceptible to internal disaffection. The Faculties became more competitive in seeking students and more determined to make best use of their depleted resources. Staff found themselves teaching larger classes for longer hours, and many complained that they had little time to pursue research. The research schools doubled their efforts to show how they were contributing to national needs, looked for new links with industry and commerce, and sought strategic allegiances with other institutions. Staff on both sides of the campus responded to urgent demands that they perform, and present reports to prove that they were performing.

Oskar Spate, now many years retired, produced a sketch of ‘Dawkins’ dream’, comprising 22 large volumes with titles such as ‘Questionnaire on research’, ‘Significance of research’, ‘Significance of research on research’, ‘Organisation of research’, ‘Assessment of research’ and ‘Reorganisation of assessed research’, accompanied by one tiny volume entitled ‘Resultant actual research’. Many agreed that planning and reporting had become ends in themselves. But the new system was here to stay.
Amalgamation revisited

In mid-July 1988, shortly before the expected release of the government’s White Paper, Nichol was invited to a meeting with Minister Dawkins. Also present were Peter Karmel, in his capacity as Executive Chairman of the Canberra Institute of the Arts, a part-time position to which he had been appointed soon after his retirement from the ANU; and Roger Scott, the Principal of the Canberra College of Advanced Education. The meeting was short. Dawkins told the representatives of the three institutions that the University, the College and the Institute should amalgamate.

The earlier Green Paper had identified three benchmarks for membership of the unified national system. To participate in the system and be eligible for government funding, an institution had to have a minimum of 2000 equivalent full-time student units, or EFTSUs; to support efficiently a ‘comprehensive teaching program’ with some research, it should have 5000 EFTSUs; to provide, in addition to this, a ‘comprehensive research infrastructure’, it needed 8000 EFTSUs. Institutions which failed to reach an appropriate benchmark were urged to ‘consolidate’ in order to achieve anticipated efficiencies and economies of scale.

Each benchmark was relevant to one of the institutions in the Australian Capital Territory. The Canberra Institute of the Arts (CITA), itself a recent amalgam of the Canberra School of Music and the Canberra School of Art, had under 600 EFTSUs with no desire to reach the necessary 2000 and no prospect of doing so; the Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAE), with 4836 EFTSUs, was approaching the 5000 considered appropriate for a teaching university; and the ANU, with 5362 EFTSUs, fell way short of the 8000 which would enable the Faculties to be funded for both teaching and a comprehensive research structure.

The figures were clear. Nevertheless, because they were accustomed to regarding their institution as a special case, ANU academics and administrators wondered whether the amalgamation arrangements were intended to apply to them. Dawkins’ meeting with Nichol, and his formal announcement after the release of the White Paper, left no doubt that they were. Moreover, where most state institutions would be able to choose their own forms of consolidation, the institutions in the ACT, governed by Commonwealth legislation, were given no choice but to amalgamate.

‘With quavering boots’, as he later remembered, Nichol called a meeting of all staff to tell the University what the Minister had in store. The immediate reaction was more of bewilderment than horror, as people across the campus tried to guess what the future held. Dawkins promptly appointed a steering committee to plan the merger; staff were told that CCAE and CITA staff should henceforth be regarded as internal applicants for positions in the University; and in October the government appointed an interim council to take charge of the amalgamated institution.

In the meantime, as people within the University gave thought to exactly what the merger would mean to them, there developed a solid body of opposition. The prospect of amalgamation with the Canberra Institute of the Arts, whose two main buildings were located adjacent to the ANU campus, was accepted with equanimity. A merger with the
Canberra College of Advanced Education, however, was seen by many people as presenting major problems. Established in 1967 in the new town of Belconnen, the College was a product of the Martin Committee’s recommendations a few years previously to create a binary system of higher education, comprising universities, with their traditional emphasis on research and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and colleges of advanced education, with a strong vocational orientation. The colleges would teach technical subjects, business and administration, as well as a component of general education. They were to offer diplomas rather than degrees; and they were explicitly urged to resist the temptation to copy ‘the educational processes and curricula of universities’. This prescription proved impossible to enforce. The colleges expanded rapidly, drawing strength from rising student entry standards and growing numbers of well-qualified staff, who might in former times have been welcomed into the universities. These staff continued to see research and publication as offering the best routes to advancement within the tertiary system. Before long the colleges were awarding degrees and adopting the ritual and forms of traditional universities, and some of their staff were engaging in research comparable with that of their university colleagues.

The Canberra College of Advanced Education was widely regarded as one of the more successful in the system; and given that it was only five minutes by car from the ANU, a merger seemed more feasible than some of the other amalgamations being negotiated at the time between campuses that were long distances apart. Nevertheless, on both campuses the opposition to the merger, once it gained momentum, was fierce. Opinion among academic staff at the ANU split roughly in two, though not along obvious structural lines. The faculties, which together expected to be most affected by amalgamation, were opposed, except for the Faculty of Science. The research schools were about evenly divided, with Social Sciences, for example, voting one way, and Pacific Studies the other. Both the Students’ Association and the Staff Association voiced strong disapproval.

Some supporters saw significant academic advantages in the merger. Compared with the large state universities, the ANU’s range of degrees and courses was limited. The College, with well-established schools of Applied Science, Communication, Education, Environmental Design, Information Sciences and Engineering, and Management, could be seen as complementing and extending the ANU’s offerings, and so enhancing its capacity to attract students in an increasingly competitive environment. Links between the ANU’s Science Faculty and the College’s School of Applied Science seemed promising.

That pragmatic administrator Ian Ross, now Pro Vice-Chancellor, doubted whether the ANU had a choice. Responding to a letter in the Canberra Times from Bob Dixon, Professor of Linguistics in the Faculty of Arts and an outspoken opponent of amalgamation, he conceded that life would be easier if the merger were not to proceed. But the University had to look to the future; and the prospects of ‘an unamalgamated ANU’ ten years ahead were bleak. Until now, The Faculties had been well funded relative to other universities. There was little chance of this continuing under the new system, which would no doubt distribute funds more precisely on the basis of student numbers. So a merger with the CCAE, while uncomfortable in the short term, offered long-term financial security.
The opposition case rested chiefly on the inherent differences between the two institutions and the absence of convincing evidence that amalgamation would yield significant academic or administrative gains. Although parts of the College had become more like the University, many ANU people perceived a gulf that was impossible to bridge, chiefly because the two sides were at different levels of objective and achievement. There could be no denying that by various measures the University rated far above the College: where the ANU still had the largest number of representatives of any university on the Australian academies of Science, Social Sciences and the Humanities, the College had none; where the ANU, even if the Institute of Advanced Studies was excluded, could boast a formidable research output, the CCAE’s publications were modest; ANU academics had proportionately many more PhDs in total than their College counterparts. Although its emphasis on teaching might have allowed the College to narrow the gap, teaching was rarely given the same recognition as research as a measure of academic achievement.

Amalgamation, said its opponents in the University, would mean lower standards. The Faculty of Economics and Commerce at the ANU engaged in acrimonious debate with equivalent sections in the College over the quality of their courses, with one head of department accusing another of ‘blatant distortions’. John Pitchford, Professor of Economics since 1965, warned Nichol that ‘a group of departments of world standing could be rapidly dissipated unless something is done to ensure their continuance’. Emotions ran high. At a meeting attended by about six hundred staff, John Molony, the Manning Clark Professor of History in the Faculty of Arts, urged his colleagues to defend ‘the university we love, the community we have worked within, the ideals we have striven for, the traditions we have fostered’. Bob Dixon told Ross that the battle could be won: ‘Maybe we’ll lose in the end. But we’ll go down fighting for what we believe in. And we will not bow before political intimidation.’

Opinions at the College were likewise divided, but united in the understanding that, if the merger were to proceed, it would be on terms agreeable to both parties, and not simply an ANU takeover. Hence there were suggestions that the new institutions should be renamed, with several possibilities being put forward, including the University of

Above: Nichol outlines developments relating to the proposed amalgamation with Canberra College of Advanced Education to a meeting of staff in Melville Hall, April 1989. Other members of the panel are, left to right, Deane Terrell (Acting Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Commerce), Derek Robinson (Chairman of the Board of the Institute of Advanced Studies), Eric Bachelard (Chairman of the Board of The Faculties) and, missing from the photograph, Chris Bryant (Dean of the Faculty of Science).

Above left: Staff members listen, many with evident scepticism. John Molony, one of the most vocal opponents of amalgamation, is third from the left in the front row. Photographs by Richard Briggs.

Canberra Times.
Canberra, Chifley University and the National University of Australia. Such talk stiffened resistance at the ANU. Taking matters into its own hands, the College Council conferred the titles of professor on its College Fellows and associate professor on its principal lecturers, astonishing and infuriating many people in the University, where the title of professor was jealously guarded by demanding appointment and promotion criteria.

Politics delayed proceedings. Towards the end of 1988 Dawkins introduced his bill to create a new university, intending it to come into being midway through the following year. The bill encountered resistance in parliament, where it faced the prospect of rejection in the Senate, and in the ACT Legislative Assembly, which expected to have a say in how the new or restructured institutions would be run. As the time originally scheduled for the merger passed, Dawkins asked the three institutions for their ‘final, formal advice’. The ANU Council, which had hitherto wavered, now came out narrowly in opposition. Confronted with this decision, the CCAE Council agreed that amalgamation was unattainable. On both campuses, opponents of the merger were delighted.

Nichol, while welcoming an end to the uncertainty, anticipated battles ahead. But the threat of amalgamation quickly passed. The College negotiated an improbable ‘sponsorship’ agreement with Monash University far away in Melbourne, under which it achieved university status at the beginning of 1990 as the University of Canberra. The government introduced new formulae which provided funding on the basis of institutional profiles and supplanted the notion of arbitrary benchmarks based solely on student numbers.

Thirty years earlier, when Prime Minister Menzies had announced that the ANU and Canberra University College would be associated, there had been no doubt that it would happen. In 1988 and 1989, when a large part of the University community waged a battle against another government decision in favour of amalgamation, the Minister was obliged by a hostile Senate to let them have their way. Yet the victory probably had as much to do with the pace of political change in the late 1980s as with any weakening of political resolve. Between the time Dawkins announced his intention to amalgamate and the decision of the University Council to resist, amalgamations had occurred throughout Australia (excepting Dawkins’ home state of Western Australia), the unified national system had taken shape, and the merger of specific institutions, even if located in the Commonwealth’s own backyard, had ceased to be a pressing issue.

Few people engaged in the battles of the 1980s gave thought to the earlier debate or reflected on similarities and differences between the two attempted amalgamations. The past seemed remote. On the face of it, the two institutions that Dawkins aimed to merge bore little resemblance to the ANU and Canberra University College in 1960. Yet similarities between the events were striking. Both attempted amalgamations, the one fulfilled, the other abandoned, arose from considerations that had as much to do with politics as with education. Both took place in the context of sweeping changes to the higher education system, one instigated by the Murray Report in 1957, the other by Dawkins’ Green Paper in 1987. Both confirmed the power of the Commonwealth government to do as it wished with tertiary institutions in the ACT, subject only to the power of parliament. Both sought to merge institutions that had different histories, with little concern for how those histories might influence the outcomes.
Immediate reactions were likewise similar: the divisions of opinion within each of the institutions; the anxieties in the larger institution about having its standards lowered and, in the smaller, about being overwhelmed; the arguments about nomenclature; the determined resistance within the University as the smaller institution demanded equal status at the negotiating table. Had the second amalgamation gone ahead, the long-term results were also likely to have been similar. By mid-1989, the opposing troops had settled into the trenches. If the previous experience was any guide, the sniping would have continued for many years.

Already the battle had resulted in at least one casualty. Ever since Dawkins had announced his plan, Nichol had been caught in crossfire between the Minister, who expected him to act as chief executive and implement the government’s decisions, and the University community, which demanded that he represent the collegiate will. For a time he was in the invidious position of not knowing whether he would be head of the merged institution. Urging his colleagues to acknowledge that ‘external pressures are a reality’, he accepted amalgamation in principle while working to ensure that negotiations on large questions, such as the name of the new institution, went the ANU’s way. His own views were ambivalent: while he envisaged long-term benefits in what he referred to as a ‘multi-stranded university’, comparable with some of the best institutions in the United States, he knew that amalgamation would cause ‘a lot of heartache’ in the short term. Nevertheless, he was widely perceived as a keen supporter of the merger and therefore an appropriate target for criticism. Then Dawkins was forced to abandon the cause, which suggested that the opponents had been strategically right to stand their ground. The Vice-Chancellor, his judgement and capacity for leadership called into question, found that the ground had moved beneath him.

Music and art

In marked contrast with the turmoil that accompanied the University’s relations with the College of Advanced Education, the merger with the Institute of the Arts slipped through almost unnoticed. At the time, the Institute was not much more than a name on a letterhead, though its component parts, the Canberra School of Art and the Canberra School of Music, both had reputations far beyond the local community.

The School of Art had grown from humble beginnings as part of the Canberra Technical College, a conglomeration of huts behind a bus depot in the suburb of Kingston. Art classes were introduced after the war, under the auspices of the National Art School in Sydney and the New South Wales Department of Technical Education. In 1969 the art teachers moved to the elegant art deco building alongside the University, recently vacated by Canberra High School; and in 1976, when a separate system of technical and further education was established in the ACT, the College’s Art School was reconstituted as the Canberra School of Art, with its own Director and Council.

The School flourished under its first Director, Udo Sellbach, who had previously been head of the Tasmanian School of Art. Sellbach, a printmaker, had a vision of a
community based School which drew on the national links that Canberra was able to offer. He brought cohesion to what had previously been largely unrelated courses, giving equal emphasis to crafts and fine arts. The School ventured into new areas: Klaus Moje set up the first glass workshop in an Australian art school, while Ragnar Hansen did the same for gold and silversmithing. Jörg Schmeisser enhanced the School’s reputation in printmaking.

The Canberra School of Music opened in 1965, in modest premises in the suburb of Manuka. Like the Art School, it owed its creation to pressure from local community leaders, including Ross Hohnen from the University and Arthur Shakespeare, the Chairman of the Federal Capital Press, publisher of the Canberra Times. Unlike the Art School, it began life as a separate institution. Seeking a foundation director, the School benefited from an ill wind that had recently separated Ernest Llewellyn from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, where he had been concertmaster for fifteen years. Llewellyn welcomed the challenge to create a new school in Canberra and insisted that it should aim for standards comparable with the ANU. Within a year he had gathered around him some outstanding teachers and performers, including the violinist Vincent Edwards, the tenor William Herbert, the cellist Laurie Kennedy and the pianist and composer Larry Sitisky.

Llewellyn remained Director for fifteen years, creating a school that ranked among the best in Australia. In 1976 it moved from Manuka to a new building in the grounds of the old Canberra High School, and hence adjacent to the School of Art and a short stroll from the University. The new building incorporated a concert theatre, later named Llewellyn Hall, which seated up to 1500 people and became the main venue in Canberra for concerts by local and visiting orchestras and artists, as well as the new location for the University’s graduation ceremonies.

Even before Dawkins issued his general directive to amalgamate or perish, the independence of small institutions was becoming precarious. Sensing the threat, the schools of Art and Music decided they would be better placed to protect their integrity under a single banner, and initiated steps towards a merger. Early in 1988 they came together as an autonomous statutory authority known as the Canberra Institute of the Arts, governed by a Board comprising Peter Karmel as part-time Executive Chairman, and the directors of the two schools.

No sooner had that happened than Dawkins signalled his intention that the Institute should be part of the three-way merger with the University and the Canberra CAE. The Institute quickly arranged an affiliation agreement with the University, followed in 1992 by complete amalgamation. The event was celebrated by ‘open house’ at the two schools and an evening concert by the Canberra School of Music Symphony Orchestra in Llewellyn Hall, where works by Rossini, Mozart and Schubert appropriately symbolised the harmonious merging.
Amalgamation offered the Institute security in uncertain times. While Karmel and the directors of the two schools welcomed the merger, they also recognised that Dawkins’ directive gave them little choice. Changes throughout the system added to the pressure: in other parts of Australia, similar schools and conservatoriums were joining universities and winning the right to award university degrees, which suggested that the Institute could not afford to be left out. At the same time, the form of amalgamation gave the Institute a degree of autonomy like that of a research school, allowed the schools to preserve their separate identities, and recognised that the Institute and the University applied different criteria in matters such as the appointment and promotion of staff and the admission and assessment of students.

From the point of view of the University, the two small schools were respected for their achievements and offered no significant threat to standards. There was little overlap between Institute and University courses and hence no occasion for conflict about their relative merits or the quality of staff. At the same time, there were numerous informal connections, as University staff attended concerts in Llewellyn Hall or members of their families enrolled for classes in the School of Art. Karmel’s position as Executive Chairman provided another informal link, as well as confirming the Institute’s academic standing. Physical contiguity strengthened the case in favour. And the Institute, which received a large proportion of its funding from the ACT government, offered opportunities for developing closer ties with the local community. Finally, amalgamation made sense on academic grounds. Music and Art promised to extend the range of courses in a University which, lacking some of the usual faculties, including medicine, dentistry and education, had less to offer than some of the large state institutions. All in all, Nichol and others who argued in favour of the merger were able to present a persuasive case.

Amalgamation nevertheless presented formidable challenges to both institutions. The University had long cultivated the creative arts, through the purchase and display of paintings, sculptures and fine furniture and through a Creative Arts Fellowship Scheme. Displaying works of art and having artists and musicians creating and performing on campus helped confirm the ANU as a genuine university. But there was less certainty about whether a university that measured itself chiefly through its

Left: School of Art student Marica Barisic at the lathe in the Gold and Silversmithing Workshop, 1992. Photograph by Neal McCracken.

Right: Ceramic artist Bernt Weise, foreground, with students in the community arts program conducted by the School of Art, 1995. Photograph by David Paterson.
research achievement should incorporate schools committed to performance and for which, except in certain areas such as musicology, traditional research was incidental and even irrelevant. It was easy to overlook the fact that performance had always been a central part of the University’s activities: A.D. Hope, for example, was better known as a poet than a researcher, and the writing of poetry is more comfortably defined as performance than research; and John Passmore was as much the practising or ‘performing’ philosopher as he was the researcher in the discipline called philosophy. Tradition had subsumed such activities under the research umbrella. Blowing a trombone and weaving a rug represented, for the ANU, unfamiliar forms of academic achievement. If amalgamation was really to work, the University would need to acknowledge new measures which gave such activities the same status as research.

The challenge for the Institute of the Arts, on the other hand, was to maintain its commitment to performance without yielding to traditional University expectations relating to research and publications. Would staff of the Institute continue to devote themselves to the quality of their performance, or would they be distracted by the demands of obtaining a higher degree? The PhD had often dulled the creative spirit in the humanities and social sciences. Would it have a similar effect in the creative arts? Or would the University’s criteria for the award of PhDs adjust to accommodate outstanding performance? Would students seeking admission to the Institute be expected to conform to entry requirements for the University as a whole? Would
Mozart get into Cambridge?’ asked Don Aitkin, one of the few people to raise these issues. ‘Would it have mattered?’

Such questions seemed remote as the University looked forward to its fiftieth anniversary celebrations, enhanced by creative presentations from staff and students in the Institute of the Arts. The future of the Institute as an integral part of the University seemed bright. Although the merger had so far brought few of the cost efficiencies forecast by the government, in other respects it was widely acknowledged to be one of the happier outcomes of Dawkins’ reforms.

John Curtin under siege

No sooner had the University put the CCAE amalgamation crisis behind it than it was confronted with another.

Early in 1987 the Australian Science and Technology Council, in a paper which assessed the overall direction of Australian research funding, had suggested that the Institute of Advanced Studies as a whole should be reviewed. Karmel was suspicious: the proposed review seemed to imply that the future of the Institute was ‘up for grabs’, and that its resources would be distributed among the state universities. The proposal also suggested a significant change in the nature of reviews. The early reviews of the research schools, beginning with Robert Street’s review of Physical Sciences, had been conceived as internal mechanisms for change. This new review could be seen as a means of enforcing external accountability.

Characteristically, Karmel decided that if a review was inevitable, the University should seize the initiative and make sure that the inquiry demonstrated the Institute’s contribution to the national research effort. Nichol followed through, telling the Minister that the system of higher education had so changed since the foundation of the University that the role of the Institute deserved to be carefully explored, preferably by an external review, conducted under the auspices of government. The initiative was a pre-emptive strike. It was a risky undertaking, all the more so because Karmel was no longer there to see that matters did not get out of hand.

In consultation with the University, the government appointed a committee of eight, chaired by the highly respected former Governor-General, Sir Ninian Stephen, and including five other members who were resident in Australia, one Australian who was research director of a large biotechnology company in California, and one of America’s most eminent social scientists. Unlike all the later reviews of individual research schools, there was no member appointed from within the University. The terms of reference were wider than originally intended, requiring the committee to enquire into the standing as well as the role of the Institute, the respective roles of the Institute and other Australian research and higher education institutions, its role in specific areas, and the ways in which it was funded.

Senior members of the University recognised that in the context of Dawkins’ reforms the reviewers were likely to ask hard questions. The most pressing one
related to funding: should the Institute seek to retain its separate research funding, comprising about 13 per cent of the total funding for higher education research in Australia, or should it seek to compete with other universities for some of its resources? While many research projects, well able to withstand the scrutiny of peer review, might benefit from access to Australian Research Council and National Health and Medical Research Council funds, the continuation of guaranteed funding provided opportunities, rare in the Australian research environment, to develop long-term projects and to pursue ‘fundamental research’ wherever it should lead.

Whichever way the University chose to argue, there was an element of risk. The Board of the Institute decided that the status quo was the safer bet, and determined to defend it vigorously by pressing not merely for a continuation of separate base funding, but for an increase. A presentation of almost three hundred pages showed, with the help of ‘some standard and some novel bibliometric measures of success’, how much the Institute was contributing to Australian research and in particular the impact of that research, and described how Australia benefited from a diversity of approaches to research funding.

The review committee was persuaded, and recommended that the non-competitive mode of funding should continue, with the qualification that a portion of the budget should be allocated on the basis of postgraduate student numbers. This gave renewed emphasis to the Institute’s training role, about which there had been some doubt ever since the state universities had begun turning out large numbers of PhD graduates. The reviewers stated explicitly that ‘the Institute should retain its distinctive character as part of a university, with all the benefits that brings, not only to the Institute but also to The Faculties’. At the same time they proposed a clearer distinction between the two parts of the University, with the current system of funding by a single parliamentary vote being replaced by two votes. This reversed the trend that Crawford had set in train twenty years earlier of using budgetary strategies to bring the two parts closer together.

Most of the other recommendations were uncontroversial: the appointment of a director of the Institute to improve overall strategic management, a consultative committee to strengthen links with the rest of the higher education system, and advisory committees for each school; steps to forge closer connections with other Australian universities and to make the Institute a resource for the whole research community; the continuing encouragement of the Graduate School; determined efforts to recruit suitable women, especially at senior levels. The committee also recommended the total abolition of tenure in the Institute. Here the University demurred, arguing that a substantial core of traditional continuing appointments was necessary to make best use of the Institute’s resources.

There was plenty of comfort in the committee’s findings, especially in its broad conclusion that in most respects the Institute had met its charter ‘outstandingly well’. The report gave specific endorsement to ‘strategic research’, which combines ‘a search for fundamental understanding with a concern for significant use’, commenting that the work of the research schools and centres was replete with examples of research that was guided by these complementary goals. By recommending a mechanism of funding by a block grant in the parliamentary
estimates, the committee acknowledged the role of the Institute as ‘a distinctive part of Australia’s academic research system’.

Those inside and outside the University who had advocated radical change were disappointed. Aitkin, watching the proceedings as chair of the Australian Research Council, thought the University, by arguing defensively, had missed an opportunity for real change, and that the Institute would gradually run down, becoming more remote from the rest of the higher education system. Another member of the ARC dismissed the report as ‘a bit of a squib’.

Yet in one area the committee’s recommendations were revolutionary. In the John Curtin School, the reviewers found ‘special problems’ not shared by other parts of the Institute. ‘What has particularly concerned the present Committee is not simply the existence of problems—all institutions have them—but rather the persistence of a set of particular problems identified in two successive decennial reviews and obviously still largely present in 1990.’ The committee proposed ‘drastic and immediate action’: the transfer of some activities, the termination of others, and the continuation of the remainder in a smaller but more coherent institute situated within the ANU but funded for research by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

For most members of the school, this was an appalling and totally unanticipated prospect. Yet for anybody who had read the 1978 and 1988 reviews of the school, absorbed the various submissions to the committee, and listened to some of the public sniping, the recommendations should not have been surprising.

What was surprising was the committee’s failure to demonstrate convincingly that it was pointing the school in the right direction. JCSMR staff asked why their school and no other was subjected to detailed performance evaluation, and charged that they had not been adequately consulted. Critics could point to the reviewers’ failure to appreciate recent changes that had taken place under Robert Porter’s successor, David Curtis, now one of the longest-serving and most widely respected members of the school, who had agreed to act as a caretaker director for the few years preceding his retirement. Curtis had been working cautiously to implement the recommendations of the 1988 committee and had made considerable progress towards healing the school’s bruised morale.

The school responded to the report with more cohesion than it had known for years. Although some staff welcomed the prospective changes, most rallied behind Curtis to oppose government intervention. The issue spread across and beyond the campus. If government could take responsibility for funding one research school away from the University, could it do the same with the others? Was this the beginning of dismemberment of the whole institution? Were there implications for the autonomy of universities generally?

Yet the government seemed determined to see that the recommendations were put into effect. Nichol decided to accept what appeared to be the inevitable and negotiate to ensure that the University, if no longer in charge of the money, would at least retain control over the directions and management of research. Opinions on Council were divided. Some members wanted to stand firm; others feared that, if the University did not accept the government’s wishes, worse might follow.
In November 1991, after several months of discussions, Council voted by a narrow margin to allow negotiations with the NH&MRC to continue, as the least unpalatable of the options open to it. This was widely perceived as a surrender, and it brought matters to a head. The Board of the Institute urged Council to rescind the resolution, declaring that it represented a denial of the University’s authority to manage its own affairs. The heads of schools, after agonising over how the University would cope if support for JCSMR was cut, nevertheless decided that the University must resist intrusions into its autonomy. The next day some five hundred members of the academic and general staff packed into the H.C. Coombs Lecture Theatre to send a message to Council members that their previous decision was ‘wrong, divisive and irresponsible’, and to urge them to think again.

That lunchtime rally was one of the most emotionally charged in the University’s history. Although a majority of those present were staff and students of the John Curtin School, people came from all parts of the University. Oliphant and Coombs were present by invitation. A few held up banners for the television cameras, proclaiming among other things ‘DAWKINS DIRTY DEEDS’. Barry Osmond, Director of the Research School of Biological Sciences, took the chair and attacked the proposal to transfer funding as ‘a clearly orchestrated invasion of academic freedom’. Other speakers outlined the achievements of the school, exposed the Stephen committee’s proceedings as ‘a travesty’ and warned that all Australian universities were at risk. Then came the climax as Oliphant, now aged 90, rose shakily to his feet to denounce the government and repeat a threat that he had earlier delivered to the Vice-Chancellor to return his Honorary Doctorate of Science should the University yield any control over JCSMR. Coombs, over four years younger and more sprightly than Oliphant, then explained (in the theatre named after him) why, after fifteen years of silence on University matters, he had decided to speak out against the threats to university autonomy and academic freedom. The audience gave the two old men a standing ovation. The chair invited everyone present ‘to join a university reborn’, and the rally passed motions bringing pressure on Council to stand firm against the government’s ‘destructive policy’.

Two days later Council, meeting for the last time in the form that it had been constituted in 1951, reconsidered the various arguments and rescinded its earlier motion, effectively putting an end to further negotiations with the NH&MRC. The government responded by announcing that the $16 million that had been set aside for JCSMR would now be administered by the Department of Health, Housing and Community Services, under arrangements to be worked out between the department and the University. In the short term, the University appeared to have lost the battle, in that JCSMR would continue to be funded as a separate part of the Institute; but at least the threat of being ‘swallowed’ by the NH&MRC had been removed.
Control of the John Curtin School now became a political issue in the Senate, where the Liberal-National Coalition, with minor party and independent support, had the numbers. In the early months of 1992 a Senate committee braved the unfamiliar territory of academic politics and tried to make sense of the contending issues. After considering over one hundred submissions and receiving oral evidence from nearly thirty witnesses, including Sir Ninian Stephen and three other members of his committee, the Minister for Higher Education, the Vice-Chancellor and many other members of the University, the Senate committee concluded that the school had been hardly done by, in that Stephen and his colleagues had failed to take account of changes that had taken place since the 1988 review and had not shown that their solution would overcome the problems that were said to persist. The Senators acknowledged that the school had faced a ‘myriad of difficulties’, and made a fair attempt to enumerate some of them; but was the situation grave enough to justify outside intervention? On the question of funding, the Senators divided along political lines, so that there was no unanimous conclusion.

Later in 1992 the Senate passed a bill intended to force the government to return the school to the old form of funding as part of the University’s grant through the Department of Employment, Education and Training. But the government rejected it in the House of Representatives, so that the school continued to be funded separately and therefore remained uniquely vulnerable to government intervention.

The Senate inquiry turned out to be a valuable exercise for the University and the school. There was some benefit gained from the Stephen committee’s discomfiture, especially in the long term. Drawing on evidence provided chiefly by members of the school, the Senators were unanimous in criticising the committee’s processes in relation to JCSMR and in urging that future reviews should follow more clearly defined procedures. It seemed now that even the most eminent reviewers were themselves not above being reviewed. Certainly, the second review of the Institute would have to be more careful and thorough than the first.

The inquiry also helped bring the school’s problems into the open. Everybody had been given the opportunity to come forward with grievances, and nobody could now claim to have been ignored. Once exposed, the difficulties had a better chance of being resolved. And future directors would find their hands strengthened by an increased awareness among staff that internal dissent was a luxury they could not afford.

Nor was it possible to rely on notions of university autonomy to protect the University or the school from outside intervention. With disarming candour, the Senate committee remarked that the question of autonomy had been debated ‘ad nauseam’, an expression which suggested that the concept meant more to academics than it did to politicians. The committee concluded, implicitly, that government

At the rally in December 1991 to ‘save the JCSMR’, the audience gives Coombs and Oliphant a standing ovation. In the foreground, left, Tim McCombe, President of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia and a warm friend of the research school, and right, David Curtis. Canberra Times.
intervention in the affairs of a university could be justified if the circumstances were sufficiently grave, but divided along political lines about whether or not the Minister had undermined the autonomy of the ANU. The division suggested that autonomy was negotiable on political grounds, which was as it always had been.

Once again, the Vice-Chancellor had been caught in the midst of a conflict not of his making. While personally opposed to any suggestion that a part of the University should be funded differently from the rest, Nichol had concluded that it was safer to negotiate with the government than to resist. Yet many people on campus believed that there was no room for compromise, and that anybody who attempted to do so was betraying the University. As happened during the conflict over amalgamation, many academics were looking for strategic leadership which the Vice-Chancellor seemed unwilling or unable to give. Gradually he became marginalised within the University community. Some senior professors, chiefly from the natural science schools, urged him to step aside. With another review of the Institute scheduled for 1995, the year in which his seven-year appointment was due to end, Nichol decided to give his successor time to prepare for the review and submitted his resignation, to date from the end of 1993. It was a hard time to be a vice-chancellor.

The University in the marketplace

The Dawkins revolution thrust the ANU, along with the rest of the higher education system, into the marketplace. In the mid-1940s the University’s planners had talked vaguely about links between research and industry. Academics would pursue basic science, and industry would develop their discoveries for the benefit of the whole nation. Few people gave thought to how exactly this might be achieved, other than supposing that industry would seize eagerly on whatever researchers had to offer.

This was wishful thinking. Unlike the United States and Western European countries, Australia had no tradition of universities and industry working together, or of industry supporting university research. People in industry, if they gave any thought at all to academics, tended to dismiss them as inhabitants of ivory towers, who had little or nothing to contribute to practical affairs. Academics, in return, were often suspicious of industry, judging that the profit motive was alien to pure research, the results of which should be freely available to all. The result was a stand-off, in which the nation was the loser.

So the situation remained well into the 1960s. From midway through that decade, however, a number of people on campus argued that the ANU should take the initiative in developing commercial applications; and if industry were not interested the University should do the job itself. Arthur Birch, as Dean of the Research School of Chemistry, advocated links with industry similar to those he had been used to in England. On Council the long-term chairman of the Buildings and Grounds Committee, John Yencken, a former research chemist and now a member of a management consultancy firm, successfully pressed for changes in the University’s patents policy to
encourage researchers to think about how their discoveries might be developed. The Earth Scientists sought to work closely with the mining industry, introducing a scheme by which researchers in industry could spend time in the school as visiting fellows.

A venture from the early 1970s illustrates the ANU’s bumpy entry into the world of commerce. A.J. Parker, a Professorial Fellow in the Research School of Chemistry, devised a new process for extracting and refining copper, and patented it on behalf of the University. The school agreed to devote substantial resources to developing the process for commercial use, at the same time hinting at some misgivings about the commercial nature of the project by banishing Parker and his team to old huts separate from the Chemistry building. To run this and possible future projects, Council created a private company, ANUMIN Pty Ltd, wholly owned by the ANU, chaired by Yencken and with other senior staff as directors, but sufficiently removed to ensure that the University remained untainted by commerce. Yencken secured modest backing from Australian companies and, when this proved insufficient, attracted substantial support from the United States.

The project was, as Birch described it, a scientific and technical triumph but a commercial disaster. Before it could make any money, the price of copper dropped so low that it was not worth proceeding. In due course Parker moved to a chair at the new Murdoch University in Western Australia. ANUMIN eventually followed him, for the nominal sum of seven dollars. For the ANU’s aspiring entrepreneurs it was a chastening experience.

So too was the University’s next significant incursion into commerce. This grew out of work in the Research School of Physical Sciences on the development of solar energy for commercial use. The 1976 review committee had doubts about the project’s intellectual merit, suggesting that the research team look elsewhere for support. On the eve of an election, the New South Wales government decided that the prospect of developing solar energy was politically attractive, and offered to provide funding through the Electricity Commission for a solar power station at a remote site. Council, tempted by a figure approaching one million dollars, enthusiastically agreed, and to manage the project set up a company called Anutech Pty Ltd.

The solar energy project led to the installation of a series of large reflective dishes at White Cliffs in western New South Wales, and some useful research relating to small steam engines. But the project team encountered major problems in building and commissioning the installation so far from anywhere, and completion was long delayed. While the power station eventually achieved its designed output, this was insufficient for the town’s needs without a stand-by diesel generator. The plentiful and ecologically sound supply of electricity that many had hoped for failed to materialise. The station was operated on an experimental basis for some years, and eventually mothballed.
Nevertheless, it was one of the more successful systems of its type, and the University extracted itself from a potentially embarrassing situation with a relatively clean face.

The legacy of the project was Anutech. In the early 1980s an external consultant recommended that the University set up a technology marketing company to exploit its intellectual resources. The concept was not new: in 1959 the University of New South Wales, whose charter specifically required it to aid by research the practical application of science to industry and commerce, had established Unisearch, and this was followed over the next two decades by several other ‘search’ companies, mostly attached to institutes of technology. So far, no other university had followed the Unisearch lead.

The consultant’s suggestion was taken up by John Morphett, who had served as Laboratory Manager in Physical Sciences and then as part-time Company Secretary of Anutech. Morphett, an avuncular-looking former Army officer, went about his business with military determination. He told Ian Ross that, with a University subvention and a bank loan together totalling some $100,000, he could develop a freestanding commercial operation which would give the University a significant return for its investment. Ross, who was now Acting Vice-Chancellor after Low’s departure and who shared Morphett’s entrepreneurial zeal, grasped the proposal and carried it through Council. Anutech was promptly transformed into the University’s marketing arm for academic commercial products and Morphett was appointed Chief Executive (and later Managing Director). The company was to be self-sustaining and was to operate, in such matters as the employment and dismissal of staff, under conditions set by the commercial rather than the academic world. At the same time it was made subject to restrictions not usually imposed on private enterprise, including a prohibition against touting for business. Nor was it to have an exclusive right to develop University research for the marketplace.

Anutech, its ambit thus redefined, began modestly, not in the areas of science and engineering familiar to the established ‘search’ companies, but with consultancies to provide archaeological and environmental surveys relating to road and mining developments. To provide a cash flow, Morphett took Anutech into the business of selling computers at discounted rates to ANU staff and students. The enterprise grew to become the largest and most successful commercial company attached to a tertiary institution, and a model for others in Australia and other parts of the world. In 1991 it moved from its original quarters in the wooden huts once occupied by Canberra University College to a new building on the University’s perimeter, on a site especially chosen to symbolise the interaction between the ANU, commerce, industry and government. In 1995 it was involved in projects ranging from managing diverse international aid programs in Southeast Asia to manufacturing sophisticated scientific instruments. Its annual turnover had grown to $45 million and it had donated $2.4 million to the University, as well as substantial indirect benefits to departments and the University as a whole.

Marshalling academics for commercial outcomes has been likened to droving cats. Hence the success of Anutech was a significant management achievement. It also reflected the ANU’s research and teaching achievement: the company was able to prosper because the University had so much to offer.
Only a small proportion of the academic staff were involved in marketing their discoveries or expertise, and many remained aloof from any form of commercial activity. Yet there was no avoiding the gradual adoption by the University of the forms and culture of the marketplace. When the Annual Report for 1963 had appeared with a colour cover and glossy paper, Council members had complained that it was not in good taste for an academic institution to appear so lavish. Thirty years later such concerns would appear quaint, as the University competed with other employers to attract staff and with other tertiary institutions to attract students, especially from overseas. From 1988 the ANU paid market salary loadings to academic staff in certain disciplines and fields. Staff undertook marketing campaigns to recruit students, who were sometimes referred to as clients, a term made more appropriate by the reintroduction of partial fees in 1989. Even the motto, which carried in the raw translation ‘First to learn the nature of things’ implications quite different from what Lucretius had intended, was enlisted in the service of marketing, and placed brazenly in English at the foot of ANU advertisements. (The emphasis was later corrected through the insertion of a comma after ‘First’.)

As well as influencing the University’s image, the marketing imperative helped shape the content and presentation of courses. Here there were dangers: courses could be invented or restructured to accord with fashions that might be short-lived. On the other hand, the need to demonstrate that the ANU offered students more than alternative institutions, or that one department offered better courses than another, led to a renewed emphasis on good teaching, symbolised by the introduction in 1992 of Vice-Chancellor’s Awards for Excellence in Teaching. And competition encouraged inventive thinking. Innovative teachers in the research schools as well as The Faculties devised new degrees to meet existing student demands or create new ones. Degrees and diplomas introduced during the early 1990s included several specialist...
degrees in Asian Studies, a BA in Development Studies, a BSc in Resource and Environmental Management, Masters degrees by coursework in International Relations and International Law, a Graduate Diploma in Scientific Communication, and a Master in Business Administration which focused on Managing Business in Asia (and thereby saved an acronym). Several of these courses quickly proved to be outstanding successes.

A much riskier business was the introduction of certificated courses commissioned and paid for by external funding organisations. Following the Dawkins revolution, several universities looked to such arrangements as a major source of revenue. These placed them in a situation of potentially conflicting responsibilities: while they had traditional obligations to the students to impart knowledge and understanding, and to examine their achievement objectively, they also had to meet the expectations of the commissioning bodies. The ANU entered this new area gingerly with a course introduced in 1991 at the request of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for junior officers in the department, and styled the Graduate Diploma in Foreign Affairs and Trade, which left no doubts about what it was intended to do. The course was to run initially for four years; and as that period neared an end, teachers in the program looked forward to the contract being renewed. Monash University, however, put forward an alternative proposal which seemed to the department to offer a higher level of innovation and flexibility at significantly less cost. The lesson was clear: if the University wished to compete in the marketplace it would have to work hard to win and retain clients.

None of this was entirely new. The aborted Foreign Affairs diploma was reminiscent of the course offered by Canberra University College to diplomatic cadets and funded by the then Department of External Affairs, which had been abandoned 41 years earlier when the department decided it was no longer required. Nor was there anything new about competing for students or negotiating deals to attract staff. What was different was the extent to which the ANU, along with universities throughout Australia, had embraced marketing strategies and philosophies. In the 1990s many staff wondered whether the University, in selling its products, was also selling its birthright.

Coombs, as usual, was quick to detect the trend. In his autobiography Trial Balance, published in 1981, he remarked that the great threat to the future of universities was 'the tendency of Governments and their servants to apply to universities and their work the values and the standards of the market place'. A decade later Eugene Kamenka, Professor of the History of Ideas in the Research School of Social Sciences, watched the trend with profound dismay. A Russian Jew who had emigrated from Berlin to Sydney at the age of nine in 1935, he had studied philosophy under John Anderson at the University of Sydney and joined the Department of Philosophy in the Research School of Social Sciences in 1955, first as a student and later as a member of staff. In 1969 the History of Ideas Unit was created around him. A man of courtly manners, benign visage and ample girth (a visiting wit once said that he required not so much a chair as a chaise longue), and one of the University's most fluent and stimulating speakers on any subject he cared to address, he published extensively on
nationalism, Marxism and other revolutionary movements, human rights and legal theory. He was an academic entrepreneur of the traditional sort, whose trade was people and ideas. Under his leadership, the History of Ideas Unit attracted over more than two decades many of the world's most outstanding thinkers and writers, including Q.R.D. Skinner from Cambridge; Shlomo Avineri from the Hebrew University, Jerusalem; J.P. Plamenatz from Oxford; J.G.A. Pocock from Washington University, St Louis; Sir Isaiah Berlin, the President of the British Academy; and D.N. Winch from Sussex.

As a follower of Anderson, Kamenka had inherited a commitment to freedom of thought and to the concept of universities as bastions of critical thinking about the societies around them. Now he found those beliefs challenged. Universities supposed to be dedicated to truth and accuracy were compromised by the values of the marketplace: 'We have adopted the language of the advertising media. If you read any university's description of itself as it attempts to attract students, it's scandalous. If a commercial firm did it we would call it false advertising.' Now money determined everything, and as a result education was suffering. In a valedictory lecture, delivered in 1993 just six months short of his retirement (which was tragically followed three weeks later by his death from cancer), he warned of the threat to traditional values:

The central function of a university is to promote, sustain and impart knowledge and intellectual capacity. On that all its other functions depend. The humanities and the sciences, not the skills of management, communication, making or saving money, offering care and compassion, are the core from which a university derives its values, ideals and irreplaceable social functions.

Was there a middle way? Symbolically, University House suggested that there might be. In the early 1970s, the House was facing financial crisis. Costs were rising and occupancy rates were falling, as increasing numbers of postgraduate students, for whom residence was no longer compulsory, chose to live in houses and flats off campus. At the end of 1971, University House had accumulated a deficit almost three times the size of its annual subvention. It appeared that the gracious living, as conceived by the Academic Advisers and implemented by the first Master, Dale Trendall, would soon be a thing of the past. Long-term residents commented ruefully on the deteriorating quality of meals. A decision in 1972 to separate the room tariff from the meal tariff meant that staff, scholars and visitors no longer necessarily ate together and that much of the collegiate atmosphere of the House was lost. Faced with a choice between maintaining tradition and yielding to financial imperatives, Trendall's successor Sir Rutherford Robertson and his colleagues seemed unsure which way to turn.

Robertson had started to bring the ship around when in 1973 he resigned to become Director of the Research School of Biological Sciences. He was succeeded the next year by Ralph Elliott, formerly Professor of English Language and Literature at Flinders University of South Australia, a German-born Chaucer scholar who as a boy had wanted to be a hotel manager. With an exuberant manner and a flair for public
relations, he seemed made for the job. Adding to his credentials, he had just spent a year at University College, the oldest of the Oxford colleges, where he had seen that even in Oxford changes were being introduced to increase revenue.

Building on changes that Robertson had initiated and adding many of his own, Elliott, with the help of astute managers, worked hard to make University House pay. Daily meals in the Hall were abandoned and a Cellar Bar built as a cost-effective alternative; rooms were renovated to cater for more demanding clients; membership was widened to encourage University staff and outsiders to make use of the facilities; the House was vigorously promoted as a conference and reception venue. At the same time, Elliott sought to maintain something of collegiate tradition by organising weekly House dinners and occasional grand feasts, and encouraging cultural activities, such as musical performances and poetry readings. By 1980 University House was breaking even, without the help of a subsidy.

Later masters and managers continued the commercial emphasis, implicitly upholding tradition by marketing heritage. In the mid-1990s the House was returning substantial profits and achieving occupancy rates that were the envy of many Canberra hotels and motels. While it had long ceased to be, as its founders had intended, a college for graduate students, who now occupied about a quarter of the total available rooms, it served the University in other ways: as a national venue for conferences and seminars; as a meeting place where, in the Bistro, Cellar Bar or the shade of the Fellows Garden, colleagues from across the campus could exchange ideas, hatch new projects, and plan for the future; and as a place to entertain and accommodate visitors to the ANU from outside Canberra.

And because so many visitors now arrived from the airport or some other part of town, it no longer mattered that University House was, in accordance with Brian Lewis's original plan, facing the wrong direction.