

The Academy in Decay

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The academy and the agora

Over several decades diverse strategies have been applied to increase the number of university graduates in Australia. In the 1940s, for example, the Curtin Labor government funded an increased number of scholarships, and, for the first time, women could apply for these scholarships. In the 1960s, the Liberal government under Menzies opened several new universities in outer-metropolitan localities. Funding for postgraduate scholarships was also provided by this government in order to promote research. In 1967, access to tertiary studies increased when (non-university) Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) were opened to provide specialist education and preparation for teaching, nursing, accountancy, and so on. In the 1970s, the Whitlam Labor government took a different stance again, abolishing fees in 1974, in a policy that remained in place for 15 years. Donald Meyers (2012) traces the genesis of another such major policy shift in higher education, when just over two decades ago an enterprising politician, John Dawkins, and an academic economist, Bruce Chapman, placed a spotlight on higher education in Australia.

From time to time, an entrepreneurial politician will emerge on the political landscape and, being adept at spotting a policy problem in need of a solution, will forge a symbiotic relationship with an academic to produce some evidence relating to this problem. With the passage of political time, a major restructuring is then delivered on the basis of that academic work. An earlier notable example of this phenomenon was the promise of free-to-user universal health insurance that facilitated the end of two decades of conservative government by Whitlam Labor in 1972. This nexus between the academy and government turned on the work of two health economists, Dick Scotton and John Deeble, who had already produced evidence of the inadequacies of the existing voluntary private-insurance arrangements. When Bill Hayden was appointed Minister for Social Security in the new government, he formulated Australia's first system of universal health insurance, Medibank (subsequently, Medicare).²

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² For details of the relationship, see Scotton and Macdonald (1993; 1995).

The focus that Dawkins chose was higher education. In September 1987, Chapman, then at The Australian National University, took a full-time consultancy to work for Dawkins, who had by then been appointed Federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training in the Hawke government. This collaboration resulted in the White Paper 'Higher Education: a Policy Statement' in July 1988.

The managerial revolution comes to campus

Australian Universities: A Portrait of Decline is concerned with the aftermath of the Dawkins-Chapman restructuring of the university sector that was popularised by catch-cries such as 'equity of access', 'efficiency' and 'international competitiveness'. This was seemingly a boon for government as well in that it promised to recoup Commonwealth funding of student loans through Chapman's Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). With the adoption of this scheme, funds for government could be collected from the student base of an ever-expanding tertiary sector, thereby relieving the pressure on the Federal budget.

In *A Portrait of Decline*, Meyers³ portrays (p.ii) this development as 'the destructive "reform" of the tertiary sector spearheaded by John Dawkins and perpetuated by subsequent governments'.

It is interesting to note as an aside that the book has been published only as a free PDF document on the web, with the various non-university presses he approached deeming that there was 'insufficient' interest in the topic to make it worth their while. The university publishers, on the other hand, indicated that they did not publish 'this sort of work' or that 'they already had similar work in the pipeline' (p.iii). Meyers records (p.iii) that Melbourne University Press rejected the manuscript for its indignant tone and for 'questionable assertions, generalisations and too few direct examples with documentation and detailed explanation'.⁴ Given that everyone who works in universities knows what is happening, this stance makes one wonder whether the publisher missed the point regarding the lack of data, or whether the delusion implicit in the comment is systemic.⁵

3 Meyers holds a PhD from the University of Queensland, with expertise in neuroscience and biomedical research. The author of numerous international peer-reviewed papers, he has taught in universities both in Australia and the United States and is currently practising as an environment consultant.

4 However, it is important to note that a correction is required here: the words quoted above are actually those of Dr Nathan Hollier, Director of Monash University Publishing. See Hollier (2012).

5 Meyers was not the first to suffer such a fate. *Why Universities Matter...* (Coady, 2000), for example, was earlier rejected by Melbourne University Press. The process by which that rejection occurred was highly controversial. <http://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=94&book=9781865080383>

Now, more than two decades on from the Dawkins reforms, Myers presents a portrait of a time-worn face etched with pain and showing signs of continued abuse. Through eight chapters, he wipes away the make-up from the cosmetically disguised public face of Australian universities and holds up a warts-and-all picture to public scrutiny.

In Chapter 2, Meyers documents the limits placed upon sensible decision-making in the modern corporatised university: 'It's not uncommon for rank and file committee members to receive tens or hundreds of pages of documentation less than 24 hours before they are supposed to reach important decisions' and 'typical university managers are purposefully detached from the realities of the organisation's real work'. In the same chapter, he examines the new financial arrangements under which universities operate, and the retreat by government from funding universities adequately.

In Chapter 3, 'A Policy, a Plan and KPIs for Everything and Everyone' he tells of the alien drumbeat of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), Quality Assurance processes, 'The Planning Jungle' and the 'System Fever' to which academics are forced to march by the 'bureaucratic brains trust' that determines university policy.

Meyers places a particular spotlight on the role of 'Educationalists' — academics with expertise in the theories of learning and teaching — who have proved to be highly influential on account of the 'peculiar symbiosis' they have with managers in Australian universities. Between them they have introduced what the author considers to be flawed theories such as 'student-centred learning'. Such strategies have resulted in a situation where, he asserts, 'the proportion of students emerging from 15 years of education without the basic skills needed to underpin productive employment simply defies belief'.

Chapter 4, 'Student-Centred Pandering', elaborates on these flaws that continue to be advocated by the Educationalists despite the now-considerable body of literature that exists on the failings of the (so-named) Constructivist-based, unguided or minimally guided approaches to instruction (see, for example, Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (2006)). Chapter 5, 'Every Child Wins a Prize', discusses several other flaws in the approaches to learning, with a particular focus on the failures of the Constructivist approach to teaching mathematics.

Meyers' major concern about a student-centred learning system is that, within it, 'the only fault possible is that of a teacher who does not identify the student's preferred learning mode and who uses inappropriate in-class tasks or assessment items' (p.67). This will no doubt resonate with readers familiar with recent allegations of lecturers being required to 'explain' why it is not their fault that some students cause themselves to fail (Thomson 2012).

Chapter 7, 'Management v Academic ... No Contest', examines the clash in objectives between academic and managerial staff and gives a description of the burden that academics are bearing. There are also several intriguing accounts of 'how a redundancy is engineered' (by managers) and 'how to incur the wrath of management — without even trying'.

It is noteworthy that the potential for university managers to form alliances, such as Meyers observes with Educationalists, has long been foreshadowed by others. Readers interested in Meyers' account will gain a sense of the lineage of these ideas from earlier accounts of the problem, such as that of Culyer (1970). Culyer's analysis was cogent and farsighted. He foresaw how readily a hopeless imbalance can form over who controls the learning objectives of the modern university. He argues that the problem lies in the fact that the objective of academics is to maintain academic standards and keep those standards 'high'. But students have a different objective: to reduce their personal costs of learning (in time, effort, income forgone, and so on). Maintaining academic standards can also prove difficult for bureaucrats, who have their own objective to lower costs. Bureaucrats and students will tend to form an implicit alliance in that their shared objective of lessening the costs of learning is contrary to the costly academic objective. In this three-cornered contest, the academics, being outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, lose.

And yet both Meyers and Hil (2012) claim that all the problems started when Dawkins thought that improvements would be achieved by bringing economic realism to university education. Dawkins' solution, and a scheme to finance it, would lie in the private benefit being borne by students with the positive externality of higher education subsidised by government. The 'Dawkins revolution' has blurred the various types and abilities of students: and in doing so invites resource misallocation. But, at the broadest level, the Chapman financing solution to a positive externality 'ought' to work. However, devising economic policy for complex phenomena can be extremely difficult. While economics is often regarded as a precise science, the complexity of the problem is strictly incalculable. To formulate policy that counts in all the costs and benefits of such a major resource re-allocation as the Dawkins reform, and to weigh the distributional consequences beforehand, is hard. Often only the passage of time reveals what was not thought of, not expected, and what was missed.

No reader need regard Meyers' account as implausible, but to lay blame entirely at the feet of Dawkins and Chapman may miss something else that is important. The source of much of what Meyers finds to be happening in Australian universities is at the microeconomic level: the Dawkins reform was subsequently appropriated by managers and their rent-seeking behaviour. Along with

managerialist ways, academic work in universities seems to be under Soviet-like administration. The current environment is academically both adverse and perverse.

Academics and ‘Whackademics’

Meyers’ *Portrait of Decline* is one of a plethora of other thought-provoking books on the issues facing the modern university. These include Coady (2000); Marginson and Considine (2000); Menand (2001); Biggs and Davis (2002); Tuchmann (2009); McMahon (2009); Nelson (2010); Delbanco (2012); and Gaita (2012). Not to be overlooked either is Allan Bloom’s earlier account, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (1987).

Richard Hil’s *Whackademia: An Insider’s Account of the Troubled University* (2012) is an excellent account of what’s happening inside Australian universities today. *Whackademia* warrants discussion and comparison with Meyers’ *Portrait*, and I would urge any concerned reader-citizen to read both.

Also of great use in this regard are two very accessible essays by Richard Samuelson (Samuelson 2012a; 2012b), in which he argues, for example, that: ‘Successful economies result from many sources, not just an educated workforce, though that’s important. Other crucial influences include flexible markets, management competence, work ethic, government policies, and an entrepreneurial culture’ (2012b).

In that same essay, he also reports various useful data, such as the following:

Some robust economies have workforces with a much smaller share of college degree-holders than the United States: Germany’s rate is 26 per cent. Some other countries with higher rates (Japan: 56 per cent) are floundering. And some with higher rates (Russia: 55 per cent) lag well behind the United States economically.

As Samuelson (2012a) sees it:

The real concern is the quality of graduates at all levels. The fixation on college-going, justified in the early postwar decades, stigmatizes those who don’t go to college and minimizes their needs for more vocational skills. It cheapens the value of a college degree and spawns the delusion that only the degree — not the skills and knowledge behind it — matters. We need to rethink.

Another important and very relevant contribution from the United States is the book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Arum and Roksa 2010) in which sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa reported on their work to measure gains in critical thinking, analytical reasoning and other 'higher-level' skills taught at the tertiary level to students at four-year colleges and universities. Among several findings drawn from data on 2,322 students from 24 schools, the authors report that 45 per cent of college students had not significantly improved their critical thinking and writing skills after two years; after four years, the proportion was still 36 per cent and, in most cases, only 'modest' improvement could be reported. They also report the poor results to be associated with academic standards that are too lenient. For example, of the students surveyed, one-third said that they studied alone five or fewer hours a week; half of those surveyed reported that in no subject in the prior semester had they been required to do more 20 pages of writing. When, in summary, the authors asked themselves, 'How much are students actually learning in contemporary higher education?' they concluded (p.34) that for many undergraduates the answer is 'Not much'.

With the university's core activity being the production, discovery and dissemination of knowledge, the fad of having the modern university operate on a managerial business model ignores the minefield of externalities — positive and negative — inside universities. These externalities have long been known about. For a detailed recent description, see McMahon (2009).⁶ The externalities of universities are poorly understood but mostly they are ignored and grossly mishandled.

Meyers' book will undoubtedly provoke varied reactions, partly because the homogeneity that once existed across the separate and different components of Australia's higher-education sector (university, CAE ...) has become blurred since the Dawkins reforms.

Some may dismiss Meyers' account because it contains anecdotes that do not reflect the whole picture or merely reflect the jaundiced view of someone who was once employed in a New Generation University (NGU).⁷ Such reactions would be regrettable: it is worth keeping in mind that Meyers came from 'industry' and has since returned to industry. His perspective — raw as it is in parts — is nevertheless important and fresh, and ought to be listened to.

6 In this book, McMahon also reports the results of his attempt to quantify the externalities: that exercise is brave and desperately needed but the task proved to be bigger than Ben Hur. Although confidence cannot be placed in the magnitudes that McMahon reports, he paves the way for future work. More importantly, though, McMahon's book is further evidence of the failures of the managers to manage.

7 The New Generation University was a government classification for relatively newer universities that has been abandoned since Meyers' term of employment. Many such universities now come under another classification such as the so-called Regional Universities Network.

Dawkins' reforms have resulted in a spectrum of institutions scattered along quite different dimensions; the people employed at one end of the spectrum are often not aware of other ends.

Australia's academic workforce is likely to regard some of the content of this book as all too familiar, possibly mildly rambling, and yet somewhat therapeutic as well, since various phenomena that he describes are real. Yet again, there are the self-deluded and the uninitiated who may find this book to be an exaggeration, a work of science fiction or fantasy. The growing evidence adduced in this review strongly suggests that Meyers' account may be raw but it is not singular; and the uninitiated may wish to keep in mind that truth is often stranger than fiction.

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