The degrading of university education

The failure from within

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> The grand villa on the slopes of the Acropolis was confiscated not long after the philosophers left. It is clear that it was given to a new ... owner. Whoever this owner was, they had little time for the ancient art that filled the house.
>
> Catherine Nixey, *The Darkening Age*

Education Minister Tehan's recent announcement to double the cost of an Arts Degree has been a bombshell like no other in recent higher education policy. Many have rightly seen it as a policy that makes no practical sense – if you want teachers, as is claimed in the overall policy, you of course need a sizeable number of these trained in the humanities. More concerning though, is the perception that the decision is just another dismal episode in the country's never-ending culture wars, where national policy seems to be driven, as much as anything, by a desire to vanquish one's ideological foes - real or imagined.

We should fervently decry this latest plan by the Government and its motivations. In this piece however, I argue that our critical gaze should be directed as much at our universities – or at least at that class of administrator that has come to run them in recent decades. In the directions and strategies that have been pursued over this time, there has been little defence by our 'institutional leaders' of the broader educational mission of universities, leaving them seriously exposed to the anti-academic, anti-democratic policies now being imposed.

I describe two notions that have been key in the directions that have been pursued, and which lie at the heart of the intellectual enfeeblement of our institutions. The first of these, is the so-called employability agenda, which has come to construct higher education in almost exclusively instrumentalist terms; the other, is the highly flawed notion that skills in university study can be unproblematically prioritised over the learning of disciplinary knowledge.

The employability agenda

Minister Tehan commenced his dramatic address to the National Press Club in June in bold terms: 'Today, I announce our plan for more job-ready graduates'. Clearly, employability was very much on the Minister's mind; in fact he spoke of virtually nothing else. In an address of just over 20 minutes, the words *employ/employment* were uttered 15 times, along with other related terms: work (15 times); *job* (22 times, including the new coinage, 'job-relevant' study). Notions relating to those pursuits that actually go on in a university barely rated a mention – *learning* (three times), *thinking* (four times), the latter used only as part of a mantra about students needing to 'think' about choosing the right 'job-relevant' degrees. The government, of course, is intending to assist school-leavers with their 'thinking' in this regard by putting the study of certain disciplines out of financial reach for many.

The reviews of the Tehan package have not been flattering. Author Richard Flanagan saw the plan as part of a broader cultural trend which 'places ever less value on the creative, the critical and the questioning, and which regards conformity as the greatest good' (quoted in Carmody & Hunter, 2020). Ian Marshman and Frank Larkins (2020), higher education researchers at the University of Melbourne, were sure the Tehan plan precludes any notion of 'a well-rounded education', or of students 'achieving their full potential and wider citizenship capabilities' (p. 1). Economist Ross Gittens (2020) was much

more pointed: 'Our unis are about to become even more like sausage factories'.

Marshman and Larkins (2020), in their response, go on to characterise the Tehan plan as 'truly radical', constituting 'a major shift in the purpose of Australian university education' (p.1). But one wonders just how much this is really the case. Arguably, the employment agenda now so embraced by the Government has been gestating for a long time, and this has happened as much as anywhere within the walls of our universities.

The road to where we are now has been a long and mainly unedifying one. The first striking out on that journey goes back arguably to the 1990s, with the publication of the *Achieving Quality* report, which first introduced universities to the idea of generic skills and attributes (Australian Higher Education Council, 1992). The new paradigm ushered in by this report was characterised as a shift in post-secondary education policy away from a focus on 'inputs and efficiency' to one of 'outcomes and quality' (Clanchy & Ballard, 1995). Whilst this new orientation was to be welcomed in many respects, a challenge confronting policy makers was how the 'outcomes' of the diverse and multifarious nature of higher education could be adequately described – least of all, measured.

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Ultimately, the solution to this challenge was a highly reductionist one, with quality and success to be evaluated almost exclusively in industry-based terms. In time, the indicators of what constituted a quality higher education were reduced to two main metrics: the employment levels of graduates; and how satisfied employers were with these graduates, as recorded in the growing number of industry surveys sponsored by government and other agencies (e.g. ACNielsen Research Services, 2000). Marginson and Considine (2000) saw in all this a significant shift in the role and status of the sector, marking what they described as the increasing 'interpenetration of economic capital into university education' (p. 52). A related development were the policies of the Howard Government during this time which sought to refashion the purposes of universities in almost exclusively utilitarian, economic terms. A significant moment amid this new milieu was the out-of-process cancellation by the then Education Minister , Brendan Nelson, of a range of ARC grants in the humanities and social sciences on the grounds they demonstrated 'no national benefit' (Haigh, 2006).

Various industry peak bodies and employer groups took their cue from such developments. By the time of the Bradley Review in the late 2000s, it was clear that such groups expected to have major input into the redesign of Australian higher education. The Review's summary of recommendations noted the desire of business and industry to see a greater alignment between university curricula and industry needs and a 'greater emphasis' placed on the development of specific employability skills (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 209). The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, for example, called for the instituting of 'more formal structures… to ensure that students are able to build industry-relevant skills' (ACCI, 2008).

Within academic ranks, the new employability agenda, as well as the increasing loss of institutional autonomy that accompanied it, was met with disdain. Yorke and Knight (2006), for example, noted the growing sense of unease from within faculties, with such developments viewed as 'narrowly conceived, relatively mechanical, and inimical to the purposes of higher education' (p. 567). Writers like Richard Hil (2012), a regular contributor to the pages of AUR, have been more forthright, seeing the new 'career-focused' agenda having its roots in the productivist demands of global capital, one that typically precludes 'anything approaching intelligent civic engagement' (p. 127).

But where skepticism has been the order of the day within faculties and departments, this has not been the case at all with the senior management of universities. Far from pushing back (or even wanting to temper these pressures in some way), the approach at senior levels over the last decade has generally been a wholesale embrace of the new agendas. Indeed, high-flying careers have increasingly been forged out of such allegiances. As we've all come to observe in our institutions, the benefits of pursuing a higher education degree are now described almost exclusively in employment terms. We see this in the advertising slogans (*Get the career-ready advantage*); in the mission statements (*We create future-ready learners equipped for the jobs of the future* etc.); in the open day sessions for future students (*Be assured, our Course X has excellent employment outcomes*). Commenting on all these developments, Jackson (2013) suggests that universities have become 'consumed' by the employability idea.

A key part of this re-orientation has been the creation all manner of outside work experience programs in industry (internships, mentorships etc.) embedded into degrees, an approach strongly supported by Universities Australia (2014). While such practicum experiences have always been a part of professional programs (e.g. in training for teaching, medicine etc.) – and usually undertaken towards the end of the degree – they are now seen as an indispensable component of most degrees. Students are often encouraged to think about these options from Day 1 of their undergraduate studies. One of the main effects of such developments has been to take students

away from their campuses – and also away from their lecturers and fellow students; away from their university libraries and classrooms; away from the social life and rites of passage that are such a part of this phase of a young person's life; in fact, away from most of the things that go to make up what is unique about the experience of higher education. In this new paradigm, it is almost inconceivable to imagine a vice chancellor in a welcome to new students saying something like the following:

> We want you to be here. We want you to take full advantage of this unique and short-lived experience in your life when you able to immerse yourself in a special world of ideas and ways of thinking, ones that don't readily get exposure in the outside world. Think of yourself in this special time of your life as a student and all the opportunities and possibilities this brings – intellectually, personally, socially – before you enter the more regimented world of work and adult responsibilities. We want the precious time at our university to be a rich, transformative one, where you will develop powerful understandings and capacities – in both your areas of study and the world in general –ones that will carry you through in whatever endeavours you pursue later on in your life.

In the current environment, such an account seems almost fantastical. But in a time not so long ago, the world – or the world of our universities – was contracted thus.

The question is how did we come so far, or so low? Clearly external forces have played their part – the effects of ever-diminishing funding and support from government (Tiffen, 2020); the increased competition for students; the relentless impositions and criticisms of the sector coming from industry and business interests. But much blame for this abandonment of the higher education ideal has to be directed at the leaders of our universities who have led the push in these directions.

Raewyn Connell (2019), in her highly-regarded book, *The Good University: What Universities actually do and why it's time for radical change*, describes the special cultural and psychological qualities that have come to characterise this group. She notes how the changes wrought in the system in recent decades have seen an older generation of administrators – 'steeped in an ethos of public service' – giving way to a new class of manager who, through the corporate nature of their operations, has become increasingly detached from the educational processes of their institutions. 'The isolation of senior managers from the university's rank and file staff', Connell says, 'is now a key feature of the university scene' (p. 130). Such isolation has inevitably involved a loss of contact with the lifeworlds of faculties and departments and with this, one senses, a diminished affiliation and commitment to the larger disciplinary and civic concerns of university study. In the increasingly arcane and remote activities of this group, it seems that the professional affinities nowadays are much more with their counterparts in the corporate sector. This is especially the case with those in the management consultancy industry, who – with their shared language of strategy and restructure – have increasingly come to play a role in the governance of our institutions (Moore & Taylor, 2019; Trounson, 2014).

In the gradual entrenchment of the employability agenda, university leaderships have also been aided and abetted by a new class of higher education researcher/administrator, typically those heading up centres of learning and teaching or moving into DVC academic positions. This group have brought a quasi-religious zeal to the promotion of these new ways of thinking. There is not much subtlety, it must be said, in the nature of their pronouncements. Curricula, it is thought, should be mainly determined by employers: '[Modes of learning] more focused on the skills employers say they want, might be more effective and efficient paths for a sizeable proportion of undergraduate students' (Crisp & Oliver, 2019). What students benefit from higher learning is seen almost exclusively in job-related terms: 'If graduates are to meet their potential, they must learn as students how to maintain their future employability through career-long employability work (sic)' (Bennett, 2019). And in the irredeemably neoliberal conception of these things, students are, of course, viewed as customers – our essential role as teachers, it is suggested, is to broker the investment the student/customer has made in their education: '[Universities] are becoming more adept at supporting students to manage their educational investment in their employability futures' (Kift, 2019, p, 50).

In this enthusiasm for 'reform', one can't help also noticing an all-too-ready inclination to run down many of the established qualities and virtues of academic learning (see for example, Herrington & Herrington, 2007a). Thus, traditional university curricula are typically dismissed for being 'bounded' and 'constrained', in contrast to the 'open-ended' and 'flexible' nature of the new industry-oriented modes; similarly, the knowledge base of programs is characterised – or caricatured – as consisting only of the narrow 'facts' and 'information' of disciplines, as opposed to the 'higher order learning' of organisations; and established assessment-types like the academic essay or review, once valued as genres ideally suited the development of students' skills of analysis and argumentation, become scorned for their lack of 'authenticity' and 'realworld' contexts (Herrington & Herrington, 2007b). What's needed to banish all this artifice from our halls of learning, it is suggested, is a bridging of the 'skills gap' (Analoui 1993) – so that there is as much similarity as possible between tasks and content in the 'learning setting' (education) and in the 'application setting' (workplace).

But we need to question the soundness of such notions. Many scholars – including a number working in the area of educational anthropology – are sure that rather than looking to

create convergence of these two domains, we need to recognise (and also to insist on) their fundamental differences (Dias et al., 1999). This does not stem from some desire to merely preserve existing structures, but rather from a recognition that the purposes and 'activity systems' (Engeström, 2001) of each type of organisation – education and work – are objectively different. Le Maistre and Paré (2004), for example, explain this in terms of differing configurations of what they call – the 'mediational means' and 'outcomes' of the two domains. Thus, in universities, the 'mediational means' are those practices and artefacts that are used for the purposes of learning (classes, labs, textbooks, assignments etc.); and the outcomes are the discipline-based knowledge and skills students acquire through these means (i.e. theories, methods, techniques).

In the move to professional practice, the 'outcomes' of university learning become in effect the 'mediational means' of the workplace; that is to say, the new professional draws on the outcomes of their learning to enact a fundamentally different type of 'outcome' (i.e. the provision of professional services to clients, patients, pupils etc.). Le Maistre and Paré (2004) argue that it is naïve to imagine that the two areas can simply be conflated. In fact, we greatly diminish the power and opportunities of one domain – in this case, education – if we try to force it to assume the characteristics of the other. A similar view is expressed by Simon Marginson. As he adamantly states things: "Work and education are qualitatively different social sites, and need to remain so" (quoted in Hansen, 2014).

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We also need to be aware of the disturbing implications of the 'skills gap' idea – which if taken to its logical ends, would seem to point towards the ultimate obsolescence of the university. Thus, if the aim is constantly to bridge the gap between the domains of study and work – to create greater and greater 'alignment' between them, as the jargon has it – the ideal situation, presumably, is one where no gap exists at all. This would be a situation in which the university was in some sense indistinguishable from the worlds for which its graduates were being prepared, suggesting a higher education system more or less subsumed into the training regimes of businesses and corporations.

Such a scenario may seem far-fetched. However, it is not too far away from the sort of 'visions' of higher education now being espoused by a range of private entities. The management consultancy firm, Ernst & Young Australia (2018), for example, in a report speculating on the future of higher education – C*an the universities of today lead learning for tomorrow?* – predicts, or rather pitches for, 'a more fragmented landscape', where alternative private providers – 'employers, corporates, professional associations' – would increasingly dominate the sector, and where degree structures would be supplanted by 'learning experiences, ranging from micro-certifications to corporate training to industry qualifications' (p. 21). The reality check for all of us in the here-and-now is that such notions were clearly articulated in different sections of the Tehan statement in June.

Skills over knowledge

Running hand in hand with the employability agenda, as we have seen, has been an increasing focus placed on skills – often at the expense of the teaching of disciplinary knowledge. Debates about these two notions – skills and knowledge - and their relationship go back at least as far as the Greeks, with Aristotle's elaboration on two distinct types of 'knowing': the 'knowing that' (episteme) and the 'knowing how' (techne). In time, this distinction came to underpin a broad division within many national educational systems – between vocational training on the one hand, with its focus on the realm of the technical, and higher education, on the other, with its focus on the epistemic. While we know in practice, such divisions are far from being clear cut, the conceptual difference has nevertheless, provided a useful way to think about the differing missions of these two institutional strands.

The increased focus on employability in universities in recent years, however, has seen a progressive shift away from the epistemic base of learning. This has been evident in the growing influence of the so-called '21st Century skills' movement (Griffin et al., 2012). The types of skills and qualities generated out of the movement are now very familiar to us all: teamwork, collaboration, communication, creativity, problem-solving, computer skills, and the like. What has also become familiar is the increasingly hyperbolic way such skills are now referred to in university documents and pronouncements. The following descriptions, taken from a Graduate Attributes policy paper at one university, speak to their almost magical potential:

> Such skills are what enable a graduate to arrive ready to 'hit the ground running' in diverse professional contexts.

> Future-ready skills are the transferrable skills that enable people to move between diverse professional contexts in the future world of work while responding to global problems.

This focus on – even fetishising of – skills has been accompanied by a derogating of the importance of

disciplinary knowledge. Stephen Parker, a former vice chancellor, and now 'national sector leader' at consultancy firm KPMG, states the case plainly: 'Our education system needs to place greater focus on skills and capabilities, and correspondingly reduce the "knowledge content" of the typical syllabus' (Parker, 2017). Others see the specialist knowledge that comes out of degree structures as increasingly an impediment:

> The world of the future is not so fixated on degrees. Employers actually want skills and confidence. [At my university] we're more into developing skills rather than transferring knowledge (Quester, quoted in Basu & Rohaidi, 2018).

In a more extreme version of this idea, there is a questioning whether lecturers should concern themselves with content knowledge at all. Universities, it is suggested, should not be in 'the content business' (Quester, quoted in Basu & Rohaidi, 2018). The rationale for such a view? 'The internet does that much better' – as though a coherent syllabus of study might be created through the simple compiling of an assortment of YouTube clips and TED talks. Under such a view, we see growing criticism of the methods by which essential knowledge is passed on to students. In course and unit review processes, for example, pressure is often exerted on academics to reduce the reading requirements of their subjects. The lecture format – especially the live lecture – is now under constant attack.

It is a relief that such ideas are not left unchallenged. One powerful critic in recent times has in fact been the Australian Chief Scientist, Alan Finkel. In a number of interventions, Finkel (2018) has expressed his great dismay at the way that ideas about workplace skills have been misinterpreted – or even deliberately distorted – in the formulation of policy and curricula. He writes:

> I say: 'Engage [students] through real-world problems' – but people hear: 'Great, let's toss out the textbooks'.
>
> I say: 'Students should be work capable' – but people hear: 'I need to teach generic skills like collaboration, instead of content knowledge like chemistry'.

And on the current obsessions with the development of students' communications skills, Finkel (2018) finds it inexplicable that 'so many people [have come to] associate being a 2lst-century worker with knowing less and talking more' (p. 29).

This is an inexplicable state of affairs, especially given that the academic literature on this subject is so much at odds with the policies being pursued. Among the various thinkers working in this area, the view is virtually consensual – this is, that the development of any desired skills and attributes can only happen in any meaningful way if taught within the context of studies in a discipline. The following are a number of key quotes from the last 20 years of research in the field around this idea:

> Such skills cannot be learned in vacuuo ... they must be learned in the context of a specific discipline and body of knowledge (Clanchy & Ballard, 1995, p. 164).
>
> A preference for teaching graduate attributes in the context of disciplines has been mentioned in the literature often ... but it cannot be emphasised more strongly (Chapman, 2004, p. 23).
>
> Educators and policymakers must ensure that content is not shortchanged for an ephemeral pursuit of skills. Skills are inseparable from knowledge (Rotherham & Willingham,2010, p. 18).

Finkel (2018) too leaves no doubt about the validity of such a view: 'The evidence from every field of knowledge – cognitive psychology, education, philosophy, engineering, applied labour economics – [says] very clearly: give up content at your peril' (p. 29).

It is worth recounting the rationale and support for such a view. On a simple philosophical level, it is impossible to think of many of the skills that appear on graduate lists without thinking of a content base that gives them meaning and substance. Such a notion is rooted in the phenomenological axiom – advanced by Brentano a century ago – that 'thinking is always of neccessity thinking about something' (cited in Howard Gardner, 1985). In relation to other skills that students need to develop – communicating, problem-solving, collaborating etc. – we can say that they too need always to be about something – about some 'epistemic' content.

And this 'something' of its nature must have a specificity to it. Philosopher, John McPeck (1992), a leading scholar in the area of critical thinking, notes that our critical thoughts are never about 'things in general', but of necessity are always directed at 'something in particular'. Indeed, it is the nature of that 'something in particular' (its disciplinarity) that generates the distinctive criteria that enable relevant critical judgements to be made; that is to say, a novel, for example, will be judged by criteria quite distinct from other disciplinary entities such as a chemistry experiment or an architectural design (Moore, 2011). McPeck concludes that the idea of skills not being related to a specific subject X is 'conceptually and practically empty' (1992, p. 54). Finkel (2018) has a similar notion in mind when he queries the value of having students learn separately about the much-hyped skills of collaboration and teamwork: "What's the use of learning to collaborate", he bluntly states, "if you actually don't have anything distinctive to contribute?"

Research in this area also confirms two additional principles. One is that the level and quality of skill development appears to be proportional to the depth of knowledge one has attained in a field. In an influential article by Glaser (1984) 'Education

and thinking: the role of knowledge', which reviewed psychological work in this area, the conclusion drawn is that familiarity and active engagement with content is 'the crucial difference between individuals who display more or less ability in thinking and problem solving abilities' (emphasis added, p. 97). It is an irony that as universities increasingly spruik their mission to produce graduates 'equipped to solve complex problems in the world', the policies pursued seem guaranteed to reduce the field expertise necessary for these problems to be adequately addressed in the first place.

The other principle relates to transfer. Thus, far from confining one to a narrow specialisation, the development of skills through deep disciplinary learning, it is held, provides a platform for their transfer to new contexts of activity (Perkins & Salomon, 1992; Clanchy & Ballard, 1995).

> Such skills – once learned – do not have to be learned totally anew in each new context. Some degree of transfer does occur, and the most effective learners are those who in fact most quickly recognise the relevance of previously learned skills to the new contexts and are most readily able to adapt them to those new contexts (Clanchy & Ballard, 1995, p. 164).

But as Ballard and Clanchy insist, for this transfer to occur, the grounding has to be there in the comprehensive and systematic learning in a field. It is these principles that have formed the basis of university learning for a century, and which arguably, have been responsible for the creation of both a skilled and adaptable workforce, and an engaged and intelligent citizenry. Within the highly problematic paradigm of 'skills over content', such foundations seem now to be very much at risk.

Reflecting on such developments, Richard Sennett (2007), the eminent US sociologist of work and employment, warns about the dangers of an education system founded more on these much vaunted skills than deep knowledge and understandings. What's produced out of such regimes, he suggests, is a worrying, 'superficial' version of knowledge.

> [This new type of knowledge] 'involves moving from scene to scene, problem to problem, team to team. Such work typically ... divides analysing from experience, and penalises digging deeper – a state of living in process. To skim rather than to dwell....' (Sennett, 2007, p. 122)

Among other things, Sennett is sure such an outlook cannot deal in any adequate way with the quite serious issues and challenges increasingly faced by our societies and the environment.

These are issues for Australia. Indeed, the abject failure of so much public policy in the country over recent years, along with accompanying economic malaise, leaves one wondering whether there might be a connection at some level between this societal decline and the reshaping we have seen of Australian higher education. There is no space to explore this issue here. However, it does seem far from clear that our repurposed higher education system, geared, as it is, to these strongly utilitarian objectives does actually produce the positive outcomes so frequently claimed.

Conclusion

When Minister Tehan delivered his address at the National Press Club, many recoiled in horror at the drastic nature of the plan. But as we have seen, these developments have been gathering force for quite some time – and, as has also been noted, this has happened, as much as anywhere else, from within the corridors and boardrooms of our own institutions. There is no doubt that any campaign to fight the Tehan proposals will need to be directed in the first place at our political masters in Canberra – who would do such wanton damage to our univerities. But, as I have been suggesting, there is also a campign to be fought on the local front – to demand much better from our own insitutional leaders, whose actions and ambitions over the last decades have failed – in so many ways – our once impressive tertiary system. To return to the archaeology quotation at the beginning of this piece, as the 'new owners' of our institutions, these leaders need to be made to account for the 'little time' they have shown to the 'ancient arts that fill our houses', and which they have allowed to become so imperiled.

But all that said, in any campaign going into the future, our greater energies will be best devoted to our students. The task here is to persuade them – and also to demonstrate through our teaching and support of them during the great challenges of these times – that they really are entitled to a much better version of a university education than the one currently on offer, and which shows signs now of only falling into greater disarray.

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