

Run that sexy motto by me again

Joseph Gora

Disaffected academic at one of Australia's 'leading' universities

The other day I was watching one of my burnt out academic colleagues on TV waxing lyrical about an Afro-American, anti-slavery activist. I turned to my lounge lizard partner and inquired: 'Wikipedia'? 'I reckon', she grunted. Look, I'm no intellectual snob, but if *Wikipedia* is good enough for one of our allegedly plagiarism-prone Vice-Chancellors (or more likely, one of his alleged research assistants) then it's good enough for me - which brings me to the question of university mottos.

What is a motto? Wonderful Wiki says, 'A motto (Italian for pledge, sentence; plural: *motti*) is a phrase meant to formally describe the general motivation or intention of a social group or organisation. A motto may be in any language, but Latin is the most used'.

Latin? Oh, good! Latin is sexy. Latin is fun. It's the literary equivalent of Viagra, without the erection, or perhaps with one (sorry to be so *obsc(a)ena* - obscene, lewd). Personally, I get really (neo-sexually) excited by those weighty scholarly tomes which contain intermittent, italicised Latin phrases. They seem to crackle through the text like static electricity. In fact, I've just read a short, sexy little romp titled *The Private Lives of Roman Emperors* ('ancient history with all the boring bits taken out') (Blond 2008) and it's full of Latinesque - a veritable literary orgy choreographed by one of England's leading historians.

Long ago, as a pompous sociology undergraduate (I'm now a pretentious purveyor of anti-Latin script), I made copious use of Latin phraseology - all in a vain attempt to appear really smart, the essential Renaissance scholar. You'll be familiar with all the drivel that punctuated my hapless/hopeless essays: *de facto*, *a priori*, *ad absurdum*, *in situ*, *per se*, *prima facie*, *ultra vires*, etc, etc. Nowadays Latin phrases make me think about *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Roman orgies (OK, I can live with that one), Catholic masses (I definitely can't with that one), and oak panelled courts of law (speaks for itself). But hey, Latin does impress the impressionable, and let's face it; there are a lot of us out

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there. Used judiciously, and steering carefully between the nerdy-pretentious and try-hard, Latin has enormous seductive potential, sometimes leading to sexual congress with recipi-

ent listeners. So powerful is its symbolic imagery that only a few emissions can intoxicate the unsuspecting subject. Take these select little morsels that occasionally trip off the tongue: *Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant* (Hail Caesar, those who are about to die salute you!), *Nemo me impune lacessit* (No-one provokes me with impunity) and *Post coitum omne animal triste* (After coition every animal is sad). But these are prudish phrases when compared to the long tradition of Latin profanity - and its here that Latin is at its most interesting. The Romans and later Latin speakers were

apparently obsessed by sex and associated bodily functions and wrote about such matters at length (excuse the pun) and in considerable detail.

But I digress. As temples of higher learning, universities are particularly partial to Latin phraseology. The more obscure the phrase, the better. A careful sprinkling of these antiquated lexical items can spice up the dreariest of undergraduate essays. Latin froth can also convey a potent image of lofty intellectualism that emboldens vacuous claims to 'higher education' and 'excellence'. The motto is indeed a wonderful window to the university's soul. It is what Oscar Wilde might have referred to as the triumph of hope over experience. Here are a few typical examples of mottos that are emblazoned on university coats of arms replete with lions, horses on hind legs, shields, crossed swords and the like.

- RMIT: '*Perita manus mens exulta*' (Skilled hands and cultured minds) – a degree in juggling?
- University of New England: '*Veritatis studium prossequi*' (To pursue the study of truth)' – post-modernists beware!
- UNSW: '*Manu et mente*' (With hand and mind) – more juggling!

- University of Southern Queensland: '*Per studia mens nova*' (Through study the mind is transformed) – sometimes into mush.

And in the 'not quite Latin' category we have

- La Trobe: '*Qui cberche trouve*' (French, *je pense*) (Whoever seeks shall find) – find what?
- Monash: '*Ancora imparo*' (Italian) (I am still learning) – a reference perhaps to life long learning?

The University of Sydney's motto, '*Sidere mens eadem mutato*' is the subject of some pompous conjecture on its website, but is said to mean 'The constellation is changed, the disposition is the same'. Your guess is as good as mine.

Mottos are of course only part of the paraphernalia that aspires to the other-worldly elitism of today's universities. There are many other promotional emissions to take into account, like mission/vision/value statements. These range from the bland and inoffensive to the pompous and arrogant, to the utterly brazen and bizarre. Designed to seduce the prospective or graduating student into the misguided belief that he or she is part of a glorious, uninterrupted tradition that harks back to the earliest days of Oxford and Cambridge, these statements are potent myths that, in effect, conceal the realities of their institutions' inner workings. Let's take a few examples of what some universities

say about themselves. Flinders University offers a neat, dot pointed overview of its mission:

- think
- lead
- learn
- link.

The dot points are never explained but are said to 'inform our teaching, research and community engagement'. One would have thought that a smidgen of post-structural deconstruction might have helped us to decipher what these perky lexical treats actually mean. But no, the promotional folk at Flinders proceed to spell out their 'Major Institutional Aims'. These are (wait for it!) to be:

- 'Known locally, nationally and internationally as a research university.
- Recognised for our leadership position in higher education through establishing courses that are distinctive and relevant, and which meet national and international quality standards.
- Acknowledged by students, graduates, employers, industry, the Australian Indigenous community, the public and our peers for excellence and innovation in teaching and in research.
- Recognised nationally and internationally as an active contributor in the global higher education network.
- Acknowledged as leading our peers in commitment and practice and in relation to equity, equal opportunity, and human relations, and for promoting the success and well-being of our students, our staff and our community.
- A leader in the community, recognised for engaging and working with external communities and organisations to create significant mutual benefits.
- A medium-sized university, with continued planned growth in activities and income'.

The underlined are my emphases and reflect the weasel words that are common these days to many university mission/value/vision statements. La Trobe University' vision statement is much more robust than many of its rivals:

'La Trobe University will continue to enhance its profile nationally and internationally and will achieve wide recognition for delivering socially responsible, inclusive, relevant and radical learning, teaching and research'.

'Radical'? This is an unusual word in the context of today's innovative-creative-entrepreneurial factory-hubs. To be fair, I don't think that the La Trobe PR

people had Karl Marx or Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in mind when they cobbled this dreary 'vision' together.

Macquarie University on the other hand is more matter-of-fact in its mission statement: 'To establish a pervasive research culture across all areas of the University, and to achieve internationally and nationally leading research in selected concentrations of research excellence, by maximising the institution's intellectual and physical resources and by maintaining a continuous improvement framework'. This statement will either leave you gasping for breath or in a state of terminal stupor. Its barrel-chested rhetoric does little to invoke the Jungian spark of life but does everything to induce deep sleep.

But for sheer blandness UNSW takes the biscuit: 'By providing an excellent educational experience and by achieving excellence in research, international engagement and interaction with the community UNSW will be an international university of outstanding quality'. This reminds me of those floral dresses worn by the docile subjects in *The Stepford Wives*, or walls painted in magnolia, or worse, over-boiled cabbage and limp lettuce. Clearly, the PR gurus at UNSW need to smoke some large joints laced with high grade hash oil or consider waking to the 'new reality' that is the cut-throat higher education system.

Equally as boring is the mission statement of University of South Australia:

'UniSA educates professionals and citizens to the highest standards; creates and disseminates knowledge; and engages with our communities to address the major issues of our time'.

It might be me, but does this fill you with the desire to look up courses in golf at the University of Las Vegas (I'm guessing!) or surfing at the one-and-only Southern Cross University (I'm serious!).

There must be one statement out there that fills one with a passion for learning. Let's go to that citadel of pedagogical excellence, and host to one of Australia's finest Zen gardens: Toowoomba's University of Southern Queensland. 'Our mission', declares its florid website, is 'to enable broad participation in higher education and to make significant contributions to research and community development'. What a turn on! 'This', it continues, 'will be achieved through maintaining USQ as a viable enterprise that:

- Offers quality professional education opportunities that are accessible, flexible and borderless.

- Creates fulfilling experiences for all students based on the commitment of skilled and caring staff.
- Develops graduates who are positioned to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.
- Pursues world-class research, innovation and practice in sustainable futures.
- Engages with communities, business and government through ongoing and mutually beneficial partnerships'.

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OK, let's try a different tack. Are there any universities out there with a hint of the good old 1960s? Are there any seats of higher learning which proclaim

passion and commitment to achieving social justice and human rights? Are there universities which bellow the Socratic virtues of vigorous questioning, debate and argumentation for their own sake? Are there any mission/value/vision statements that do not reek of the values of battery farm corporatism?

In an effort to provide a corrective to all this nonsense, I will suggest the following for a new university to be located in the dope-smoking heart of Nimbin, NSW:

University of the Unreal World

Mission statement

Our mission is to have serious fun, entertainment and passionate debate/argument/discussion about current social, economic, cultural and political arrangements. We want to unscramble knowledge claims and build a place of learning that is more than simply gaining grades for an eventual career in the corporate sector. Our aim is to act on our ideas to create a better, more peaceful, sustainable world in which people have the right to the basics of life and where equality means something. Our university seeks to dissolve power differences, contest elitism, and encourage respect and diversity within a framework of rights and justice. If you want to develop job-ready, corporate graduate attributes then go to any other Australian university. We are the University of the Unreal World!!

Postscript

Since researching for this article - shoddily, I'll admit - I have come across a statement which inspired something more than the usual stupor. So impressed was I

that I have nominated James Cook University for the Most Seductive Mission Statement Award for 2009. Under 'Our intent' JCU seeks to create: 'A brighter future for life in the tropics, world-wide'. You can't argue with that! Sun, surf and beaches come to mind. Amid all the usual claptrap, the statement claims to encourage 'intellectual curiosity' and 'to inspire [students] to make a difference in their fields of endeavour and in their communities'.

Other affirmations state that: 'We recognise that knowledge has the power to change lives' and, topically, 'that a sustainable environment is central to our lives and our work'. There's even a reference to 'passion for learning'! This is so refreshing when compared to that pallid corporate dross that makes up most university mission statements. Whether or not JCU actually delivers on its lofty promises is beside the point - the rhetoric is great!

And then there's the University of Melbourne's vision statement...*Zzzzzzzzzzzz*.

Joseph Gora is an enigma wrapped up in a riddle. It is rumoured that he once taught at a regional university somewhere in Australia.

References

Blond, A 2008, *A Brief History of the Private Lives of the Roman Emperors*, Constable and Robinson, London ISBN: 9781845297190