

What are good universities?

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This paper considers how we can arrive at a concept of the good university. It begins with ideas expressed by Australian Vice-Chancellors and in the 'league tables' for universities, which essentially reproduce existing privilege. It then considers definitions of the good university via wish lists, classic texts, horror lists, structural analysis, and shining examples from history. None of these approaches is enough by itself; but in combination they can be fruitful. The best place to start in defining a good university is by considering the work universities do. This leads to issues about the conditions of the workforce as a whole, the global economy of knowledge, and the innovations bubbling up around the edges of this economy.

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Dr Pangloss and the league tables

A few years ago the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) re-badged itself as 'Universities Australia' (UA), and since then the assembled vice-chancellors have presented themselves as 'The voice of Australia's universities'. That's what their website says, and this is undoubtedly a rich mine of corporate wisdom. 'Australia's universities', the website tells us, 'offer a unique educational experience that fosters self-belief, rewards independent thought and fuels inquiring minds'. Universities Australia (2016) has a 'vision for a smarter Australia', which will be achieved if more students, grants and fees come into universities. But of course growth 'will not be at the expense of quality. Universities have, and will continue to maintain, robust internal quality assurance mechanisms and processes.'

This robust declaration is of course written by the UA's advertising people, but it undoubtedly reflects the vice-chancellors' corporate view. They have excellent reasons to be pleased with progress. Their annual salaries averaged \$835 000 each (including the bonuses) in 2014. If the UA's lobbying for unrestricted fee increases eventually bears fruit, they will get even more. For each current

vice-chancellor, we could get a dozen tutors, research associates, and administrative officers.

A few years ago one of their number, Glyn Davis of Melbourne, delivered the ABC's Boyer Lectures, subsequently published as a book called *The Republic of Learning*. This is the most widely circulated Australian text ever written about higher education, so it's worth taking note. It's an excellent guide to the ruling mentality, and you can still find it in good second-hand bookshops.

In genial style, *The Republic of Learning* takes the listener/reader through the fascinating world of universities. Davis speaks of old and new achievements in teaching, research, and academic life, with many powerful insights: 'Much needs to be done that is new - but much needs to be preserved' [p. 29]. In universities, 'Authority is held collectively by the academic body, represented through an academic board or senate' [p. 97]. The system has dilemmas, but faces the future with confidence: 'Each public university, determined to make its way in the world, will invent the future that makes sense for it and its communities' [p. 123]. And so on.

Davis starts and finishes by invoking the great 16th-century scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam. It's a brave

choice. That sardonic and embattled writer was a noted enemy of complacency, clichés and intellectual sloppiness.

Davis succeeds, through his six lectures, in conveying a truly Panglossian picture: all is for the best, in the best of all possible worlds. Trust us! It's a verbal version of the imagery now found on all Australian university websites: sunny skies and flowering jacarandas, happy students on manicured lawns, contented staff, brilliant breakthroughs in laboratories, and glimpses of wise Chancellors conferring well-earned awards.

Easy to laugh at, when you know the reality at the coal face. But the logic of misrepresentation has now been built into a technology of policymaking which has very real effects. A striking feature of the neoliberal era is the proliferation of 'metrics' for outcomes. This has grown into a system of ranking scales, informally known as league tables, that imply an unending competition of excellence – between journals, papers, individual academics, departments, and whole universities.

The system now has, in fact, an institutionalised definition of the good university. It takes the form of widely publicised international rankings, before which even vice-chancellors tremble. Every year, as the Times or the Shanghai annual world ranking comes out, there is a flurry of media releases from Australian universities, boasting of their rank or – should the overall score unhappily have slipped – finding a sub-ranking they can boast about. There is now a small industry supplying many different kinds of rankings (new universities, technical universities, regional rankings, discipline rankings, etc.) so the market can get what it wants.

And each year, to no-one's surprise, the top universities on the main global scoreboards turn out to be Harvard, MIT, Chicago, Stanford, Caltech, Cambridge... the well-known, wealthy, highly selective, private or more-or-less-private, elite institutions of the global North. Basically, the metrics of excellence are measuring how far all the other universities in the world resemble the most economically, socially and politically privileged. The paradigm of the good university, the best of the best of all possible worlds, is there at the top of the table – in Harvard, MIT, Chicago...

Actually these are horrible institutions. I've spent a year each at two of them (one as a post-doc, the other as a visiting professor) and have seen how destructive their privilege and arrogance are for the engagement and trust that create real quality in higher education. Yes, the Ivy League and Friends have wonderful libraries, astonishing computers, elegant buildings, great art collections and low student/staff ratios. They have these, because they have wealth skimmed from the corporate economy that

has relentlessly degraded the global environment for the rest of humanity. And their wonderful Nobel-Prize-winning research? Well, much of it depended on military or corporate funding, and these universities played a major role in the creation of atomic weapons and almost equally destructive 'conventional' armaments, not to mention the neoliberal economy itself.

The league-table definitions of excellence, nevertheless, are deeply embedded in corporate ideology and practice, and have been taken up by governments. That monument of neoliberal policy orthodoxy, the 2012 white paper *Australia in the Asian Century*, formulated this as a National Objective: 'By 2025, 10 of Australia's universities will be in the world's top 100'. Since no neoliberal government, Labor or Coalition, is going to put tax money into even one Australian university on a scale that would make it look much like Harvard, the real effect of the league-table rhetoric is to provide a permanent justification for the vice-chancellors to increase fees and trawl for corporate money.

Defining the good: five approaches

For those who don't swallow the official wisdom, it becomes important to find other ways of defining a good university. This is not easy to do, if we want the result to have a grip on the practical situation in universities; but let us try. There are five ways of approaching the job.

The first is to compile a wish list. That was what I did when the 2013 strike at University of Sydney showed the shocking gulf between what management was trying to do, and what universities actually needed. This is what my list looked like at the time (Connell, 2014). Good universities would be:

1. Educationally confident
2. Socially inclusive
3. Good places to work
4. Democratic as organisations
5. Epistemologically multiple
6. Modest in demeanour
7. Intellectually ambitious.

Such an exercise can be done collectively, and perhaps should be. A collective list was attempted by the 2015 conference from which this *AUR* special issue has come, producing a Declaration that has a more generous 24 points (and included in full in this special issue). They overlap my seven, introducing new themes but also dropping a couple.

The problem with wish lists is obvious: they are arbitrary in coverage, and can be incoherent. They are not

constrained by organisational limits, budgets, or the need to persuade constituencies. Yet the exercise is genuinely useful, especially at a time when neoliberal universities are steadily shutting down their internal forums for debate. Trying to formulate a wish list is jarring: it pushes you out of the everyday, and obliges you to think in a long time-frame. Everyone working in universities should try it – and circulate the results.

Second, there's the classic academic method: compile a reading list and study the authorities. Glyn Davis and his research team did this, finding John Henry Newman (*The Idea of a University*, 1852) and Clark Kerr (*The Uses of the University*, 1963). They did not, apparently, find the economist Thorstein Veblen's splendid and highly relevant 1918 book *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*.

From the classics we can certainly get stimulating ideas; but we always have to consider them in context. Newman, for instance, wrote his famous text when he was brought from England to Ireland to help the church set up a new Catholic university. The difficulty was that the bishops insisted on having control, but in that case the Protestant-dominated government would not pay, so the project died. Newman's eloquent 'University Teaching Considered in Nine Discourses' was thus a design for an imaginary university. Its central concern was to justify having theology in the curriculum.

Newman had a critique of utilitarianism that applies to neoliberalism too: 'it aimed low, but it has fulfilled its aim' (ouch!). But he was utterly opposed to the model of the research university, new at the time, that was emerging from Germany. Newman declared on the first page of his preface that the object of a university

is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students. (ix)

(Ouch again!) Research should be left to scientific academies. The proper role of universities was to be places for liberal education, gardens for 'the cultivation of the intellect'.

Newman didn't understand research, but he did know a lot about teaching. He showed how a profusion of topics

or curriculum detail would distract students from deeper understanding, wrestling with principles and developing a sense of Universal Knowledge. No lectures at all would be better than too many. But this admirable idea of undergraduate life was designed for one social group: the gentry. Specifically, the gentlemen. It wouldn't meet our diversity KPI.

Nor, of course, do existing elite universities. There are some indications, indeed, that universities at the top of the international league tables have become less diverse in the last decade or so, consistent with the trend of growing social inequalities under neoliberal regimes.

This points to a third approach to defining the good university, rather more grounded than the wish lists. This is the procedure we might call the horror list: examining the ghastliest features of the University of Melbourne, and

designing a good university by antithesis. (To be strictly fair, I would examine the University of Sydney too. I'm a graduate of both.)

Antitheses can readily be drawn up from the critical literature about contemporary Australian universities, to which this special issue is a contribution. On my reading,

the main themes that emerge from this literature are:

1. The relentless commercialisation that has gone on since the Dawkins policy changes of the late 1980s. The re-introduction of fees was the trigger, but the effects have ramified. Lucrative teaching programs have been expanded and the least vocational areas (such as philosophy) contracted. There is growing dependence on a flow of full-fee-paying students, who demand returns on their personal or family investment. The public face of universities has been turning into a giant corporate PR exercise. The antithesis approach would define a good university as one that taught without fees; that maintained non-commercial courses; that did informative outreach with honesty.

2. The relentless centralisation of power in the hands of a managerial elite, increasingly modelled on for-profit corporate management. This trend has overwhelmed the moves towards democratisation that were made from the 1960s to the 1980s. Most often this is pictured as a loss of autonomy by academics, but the trend has also wiped out student power, and industrial democracy involving non-academic staff. The antithesis approach would define

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a good university as a democratic workplace, devolving power rather than centralising it, and finding ways to have much wider participation in all levels of organisational decision-making.

3. In consequence of trends 1 and 2, the flattening of university culture. Formulaic teaching is encouraged by intrusive online templates; forums for serious debate and dissent shrink, or are closed; staff and students alike are overworked and preoccupied with ticking boxes, doing tests and filling in audit statements. With this side of the critique, antithesis is less clearly defined. Broadly, however, it suggests that a good university will be a place rich in coffee-shops, with the coffee-shops rich in passionate argument, intense thought and exotic projects. It certainly implies that staff and students must have time for the passionate arguments, not to mention the coffee.

The wish-list, classics, and horror-list approaches all yield material for defining a good university. But this material lacks either coherence, or direct relevance to the situation we find ourselves in. Can we get an approach that hangs together better and speaks to what is practically possible? The two remaining approaches offer this possibility.

The fourth approach is illustrated by a remarkable text from the early days of the Dawkins policies. In 1994 Ian Lowe published a short book in the UNSW Press's 'Frontlines' series, called *Our Universities are Turning Us into the 'Ignorant Country'*. It was an attempt, like Glyn Davis's later effort but with a much sharper edge, to paint a broad picture of a university system in change. Lowe laughed at the attempt to impose an entrepreneurial culture, but also at the rigidities of academic culture. He diagnosed early the inequalities produced by the Hawke Government's attempt to get an expanded university system on the cheap. Positively, Lowe developed an agenda of modernisation without commercialisation. His model emphasised social knowledge and responsibility; engaged, face-to-face teaching; and a diversity of institutions of modest size (rejecting orthodox ideas about economies of scale).

A more recent attempt at synthesis is the *Charter for Australia's Public Universities* produced by the National Alliance for Public Universities (2014). This is based on an economic analysis emphasising that higher education and knowledge production are public goods, in constant tension with government policies of commercialisation and reinforcement of inequality. The document pictures a good university as an institution working fully in the public interest, internally pluralistic, and marked by continuous debate and negotiation among its communities. It sounds strenuous!

These two texts attempt to think about the university sector as a whole. They aim to be realistic about its everyday working, and to generate alternatives from possibilities that exist in the current situation. It may sound a little pretentious, but I'd call that a structural approach to developing ideas of the good university.

The fifth approach seems the simplest of all: find working examples of better universities. But there is a catch. The neoliberal policy regime has forced all mainstream universities to converge on the neoliberal model. The diversity that existed a generation or two ago, for instance the innovative curricula and degree structures of the greenfield universities of the 1960s and 70s (Pellew, 2014 on the UK case), has been sharply reined in.

Nevertheless, if we open the lens wider, there is a great deal of relevant thinking and experience. Progressive education in schools, for instance, has been undertaken in very difficult conditions while innovating in teaching method and curriculum. The Freedom Schools of the civil rights movement in the United States are a striking example (Perlstein, 1990).

Sometimes these initiatives led to innovation in higher education, as with Rabindranath Tagore's Patha Bhavana school and Visva-Bharati college (later university). This college rejected both top-down pedagogy and colonial control, and tried to create flexible and what we would now call multi-cultural programs.

Perhaps the most amazing story of bold thinking and action is the Flying University in Warsaw, set up under the Russian empire in the late 19th century. It was illegal, co-educational, and very seriously intellectual; called 'Flying' because it had to change location to avoid detection by the authorities. And it lasted for years, finally becoming legal. The tradition was revived under the repressive Communist regime in the 1970s (Buczynska-Garewicz, 1985).

In capitalist countries the university system is strongly shaped by social and economic exclusions, and there have been attempts to build working-class alternatives: notably, labour colleges in many countries. One offshoot is the current Global Labour University, a network backed by ILO (<http://www.global-labour-university.org/341.html>). Another strategy is followed by the interesting Freedom University in Atlanta, USA, which functions as a point of access to existing higher education for students, mostly from ethnic minorities, who are prevented from entering Georgia's public universities (Muñoz *et al.*, 2014).

An important new development is online activism around universities. In response to the big publishers' use of paywalls to commodify the knowledge produced by

university research, there have been many attempts to provide open access. The PLOS online journals are the most celebrated, though their publication model requires the authors to pay. An extraordinary website has been set up by the Russian neuroscientist Alexandra Elbakyan, apparently giving free access to millions of research papers (<http://sci-hub.io/>). Elsevier is taking her to court, and her response is that these publishers are breaking Article 27 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights, saying: 'everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits'.

The history of universities, and the history of education more generally, are a source of ideas, practical examples and inspiration. But because circumstances change, this approach needs to be combined with the others to develop agendas for our own situation. A good place to start that synthesis is the work universities do.

The work and the workforce

The main practical business of universities is intellectual labour, of several kinds: teaching and learning at advanced levels, doing research, and circulating knowledge that is the product of research. I emphasise that these are forms of labour. Research is not done by magical inspiration, nor is teaching done by bolts of lightning. The university is a workplace, the people in it are a workforce, and the university gets its results by patient, time-consuming labour.

Though our cultural images of intellectual work still invoke isolated geniuses – Dr Faustus and his pentagram, Dr Freud and his cigar, Professor Einstein and his hair – the production of knowledge has become more collectivised over time. This involves more than the fact that as researchers, teachers and learners we stand on the shoulders of giants – a humbling truth we all have to recognise, as Newton did. It's also the fact that more and more of us are standing on their shoulders at the same time.

Contemporary research, with very few exceptions, now involves the coordinated effort of a variety of specialist workers – including those who supply the services (clerical, financial, technical, maintenance, transport) without which the people who have their names on the scientific papers could not operate at all. The same goes for teaching. Much of this coordination exists before any particular research team is assembled, grant received or course authorised. There has to be a library, an ICT service, a teaching space, a flow of students, a journal for the publication to go into – and other universities, where there are other researchers, other students, other libraries.

There is, in fact, a profound institutionalisation of the intellectual labour process, a collectivisation that has become the necessary condition for every performance that the metrics purport to measure.

The metrics, then, focus on what is most superficial about intellectual labour, and I think university staff sense that. Hence their usual scepticism about the ranking game that so excites university managers, publicists and Ministers of Education. But this divergence of opinion also points to an important dimension of what makes good universities. It's the well-being of the labour force as a whole, and the design of the institutions to maximise cooperation across the institutions and workers involved.

The institutionalisation of knowledge production and circulation is worldwide. There is a global economy of knowledge, with a definite structure. As the philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1997) points out, the global periphery, the majority world, mainly serves as a source of data. In fields ranging from climate change and epidemiology to gender studies and linguistics, a flood of information streams to the main world centres. In the knowledge institutions of the global North, especially the elite ones, data are accumulated, processed and theorised. Concepts, methodologies, models and causal analyses are mainly produced in the global metropole.

As a result of this structure, universities in the periphery are in a situation that has been called 'academic dependency' (Alatas, 2003). Universities Australia boasts that Australia produces nearly 3% of the world's academic publications, punching above our weight as usual. It would have been more informative to say that we are obliged to import 97%. Overwhelmingly, Australian universities import from Western Europe and the USA the theories, research paradigms and disciplinary frameworks that organise their curricula and research.

What the output calculations miss is the fact that the mainstream economy, as currently organised, excludes other knowledge formations. On a world scale, other knowledge formations are very substantial indeed. They include indigenous knowledges, very much alive (Odora Hoppers, 2002); alternative universalisms, such as the intellectual traditions of Islam; and the knowledge formations I have called 'Southern theory', generated in the colonial encounter and from the experience of postcolonial societies (Connell, 2007).

The Islamic tradition of great learning centres is at least as old as the European university tradition, and across the Muslim world are many examples of interweaving the two. Local indigenous knowledges may seem harder to combine with university teaching, but there is no

lack of experimentation. The Kaupapa Māori project in Aotearoa/New Zealand is known internationally and has given rise to a classic text, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012). The revival of indigenous culture in the Andean countries of South America is now represented in higher education by several institutions. One is the Indigenous University of Bolivia founded under the Morales Government, with three campuses, which awarded their first degrees in 2014 (<http://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/bolivias-indigenous-universities>).

Universities in the periphery, far more than those at the top of the international league tables, have the opportunity for a great cultural enrichment of organised knowledge and higher education. A good university will surely take such an opportunity. Australian moves so far have been timid.

Universities are expensive institutions and a university system on the modern scale involves a major commitment of social resources. The way funding is organised matters. The model of wholly private 'for-profit universities', that has aroused some excitement in neoliberal circles, is well established in the United States, Latin America and some other regions. Basically these institutions sell vocational training, with guarantees of subsequent employment; not surprisingly, they have recruited employers to help plan the curriculum (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). Australian universities have moved in this direction to scoop up fee-paying students. We can see the chaos and corruption implicit in this logic from the disastrous privatisation of TAFE in Australia over the last twenty years.

Any alternative to the instability and opportunism of the current funding system rests on achieving some social compact about the role, value, and resource level for the university sector. This would explicitly recognise that we cannot get a good university in isolation; we get a good university sector, or nothing.

A compact will not be easy to get, as the donnybrook around the Gonski plan for Australian schools funding shows: the privileged defend their privileges. But a compact is still something to aim for. It can shift discussion forward to questions about professional knowledge requirements, knowledge formations, and just how much glitz a university really needs. Above all, it will require us to think long-term about the knowledge workforce.

Recent university management has followed two remarkably destructive workforce strategies: outsourcing of non-academic work, and casualisation of academic work (not just in Australia: see Schwartz, 2014). The complex coordination of a differentiated labour process

is best achieved when the workers know each other and can develop working relationships over considerable periods of time. Outsourcing of services, and rapid turnover, wreck this cooperation.

Further, as casualisation has become an entrenched organisational strategy, a damaging split has opened between a primary and secondary academic labour force. Tutoring, once rationalised as a limited period with the flavour of apprenticeship, is turning into a mass experience of long-term insecurity and exploitation. It is not too much to say that the long-term sustainability of the academic workforce is now under threat.

However, the generation most affected by precarious employment has been involved in a wave of imaginative alternative-university work, some of it connected with the Occupy movement. The Free University of NYC, for instance, uses public spaces through the city to conduct free educational activities, and draws on the Freedom Schools tradition (<http://freeuniversitynyc.org>). In Australia, there are Free U projects in Melbourne (<http://www.melbournefreeuniversity.org>) and Brisbane (<https://brisbanefreeuniversity.org>); the Brisbane project runs classes in a carpark, produces podcasts, and has a good set of links to similar projects. Many more examples can be found on the Web, such as the impressive Social Science Centre in Lincoln, a not-for-profit co-operative (www.socialsciencecentre.org.uk), or the charming but now defunct University for Strategic Optimism (www.universityforstrategicoptimism.wordpress.com).

A good university, and a good university system, will be concerned with the sustainability of its workforce. This means thinking not one budget ahead, but a generation ahead. Universities need to be places where people feel valued, find scope, aren't pushed about, and want to stay. Career structures need to offer, not spectacular rewards for a minority, but decent conditions and security for the workforce as a whole. Organisational structures need to create space for cooperation, learning and decision-making from below. We already know how to do this. It's not rocket science.

In conclusion

In writing this paper I did not want to define the good university by picturing my utopia. There has never been a golden age in universities and there may never be one. We will probably need a range of new types of university, as the domain of knowledge becomes more complex. We certainly need the habit of thinking for ourselves, and generating ideas from our own situations and problems.

We should be sceptical of distant palaces, on earth or in heaven.

For all the madness of the neoliberal regime, the current workforce does a tremendous amount of good work in teaching, in administration, in research and in services. That's what keeps the universities going! And there are programs that expand the episteme with indigenous knowledge and multiple cultures; there are departments with some participatory decision-making; there are many experiments with student-directed learning. It is important to document, share and reflect on this experience.

I can't predict how that discussion will go, but I am confident about some principles. It isn't enough to imagine a good university; we need to plan a good university system. Quality doesn't come from privilege or from an elite; quality concerns a whole workforce and the working of a whole institution. Working conditions and workplace relations matter for the intellectual project. We need to think about sustainability in a much longer frame than the policymakers and managers generally do. And we have many starting-points now for doing something more intellectually exciting, more socially valuable, and more globally significant, than Australian universities have yet managed.

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