

The University of Queensland Arts Faculty: permanent restructure in the corporate university

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On 28 November 2007, the Higher Education Supplement of *The Australian* newspaper carried an article entitled “*Hay’s legacy a brighter Sunshine State*”. The piece, which with the exception of one paragraph might have been dictated by the university’s ever-expanding public relations and media spin division, detailed the achievements of the retiring Vice-Chancellor, Professor John Hay. Foremost among these has been the establishment of a chain of high-profile research institutes, the Institute for Molecular Bioscience, the Australian Institute for Bioengineering and Nanotechnology, the Queensland Brain Institute, and the Sustainable Minerals Institute. These expensive institutes, housed in new purpose-built buildings, have been the product of the “leveraging” of university funds to attract matching funding from the private sector, including a US-based philanthropic foundation, and from government, mainly the Queensland state government.

There is much to be applauded in the expansion of university research particularly where it contributes to the development of knowledge and scholarship. However, the University of Queensland’s strategy for building research institutes has been closely aligned with the state government’s so-called “Smart State” initiative which has set the direction and corporate bias of the university’s research funding strategy over recent years. Yet the Smart State initiative can be viewed as largely a corporate welfare scheme designed to provide incentives for high-tech and knowledge-based industries to invest in Queensland. As such, I will argue that way in which the university has funded the expansion of research in line with the Smart State corporate model has imposed significant strains on the rest of the university, especially the schools engaged in both teaching and research.

The “Mission” of the University of Queensland (UQ) is:

*The mission of the University of Queensland is to create a community dedicated to achieving national and international levels of excellence in teaching, research and scholarship, one that makes significant contributions to the intellectual, cultural, social and economic life of Queensland, Australian and international communities.*¹

¹ <http://www.uq.edu.au/about/mission>. See also the University of Queensland Act 1998: <http://www.uq.edu.au/senate/docs/UnivOfQldA98.pdf>.

The mission statement seems to be about making a significant contribution in a very broad way. The risk for the university is that closer alignment with corporate research priorities could narrow the broad educational mission of the university as the university's role increasingly serves as a conduit for public subsidies of the research and development overheads of large corporations.

Teaching and research staff at the University of Queensland have had ten years experience of being dominated by the priority given by management to "strategic" initiatives. The practice has developed of strip-mining faculty and school budgets to provide money for "strategic" purposes, much of which has been used to leverage private and public funds for the research institutes. Indeed, the term "strategic" can be seen to have become a managerial weasel-word which means "taking from the many to give to the few". Undoubtedly, the university has benefited from the large sums of public and funding income to help provide quality research facilities but this has come at a heavy cost to core teaching and research areas which have been heavily taxed to provide the "matching funding". For example, in the 2008 UQ budget, \$609 million has nominally been allocated to faculties from operating income. Out of this, about \$174 million goes on overheads and university wide costs, and a breathtaking \$123 million for "strategic purposes".² \$317 million out of \$609 million remains with the faculties, although it is to be noted that previously centralized functions such as marketing, commercialization, international relations, etc., are increasingly being co-financed by the faculties, hiding some cost-shifting from the centre to the faculty level.

The real decline in Commonwealth funding for over a decade, whether as a percentage of GDP or in terms of public funding per student, has of course been the major driver for heavier workloads, worse student-staff ratios, and job losses in Australian public universities since 1995 (and even earlier).³ But at UQ the situation has been exacerbated by the additional pressure imposed by the university's practice of "top-slicing" faculty and school budgets to provide funds for "strategic purposes". This has been a factor in the recurring waves of restructuring which the university has experienced since 1997. In the ten years since 1997, the university has had 40 restructures of faculties, schools and other elements, which have resulted in over 500 job losses (forced or "voluntary" redundancies).

While faculties and schools have been in severe straits as far as funding is concerned, the university's capital works programme has been surging ahead. In 2005, \$65 million was budgeted for capital works (mostly for new building), in 2006, the sum doubled to \$135 million, and in 2007 the sum reached \$222 million out of a total university budget of approximately \$1 billion. In 2008, the budgeted sum is \$90 million.⁴ Even if most of this capital works spending is coming from external sources, funding the balance from the rest of the university budget is a source of some financial stress across the institution. In 2008, close to half of the capital works budget will be funded from a levy on the university's operating income, a proportion of

² University of Queensland, *2008 Budget Paper* [2007].

³ For a handy compilation of relevant data, see NTEU, *State of the Sector* (NTEU: Melbourne, 2007).

⁴ UQ Budget Papers for the relevant years.

student tuition fees, and a proportion of the so-called Enhanced Student Contribution (i.e. the increase in HECS charges in force since 2005).

Effects on humanities

What effect are these developments having on the humanities at UQ? When I joined the History Department in 1999, it could claim to be one of the strongest in the country. It had 18 academic staff. During the 1980s it had been much larger. It now has 10.5 full-time teaching and research positions. The History Department was running a healthy surplus, thanks to the efforts of staff who had taken on heavy workloads to overcome a previous deficit. In 2001, the paper surplus of the Department was around \$500,000 (which the Department was not allowed to spend). History had a large research higher degree cohort, over 100 students in 2001, and the postgraduates had a strong sense of community and of identification with their Department.

In 2001, a university-wide change in organisational structure the Arts Faculty replaced eleven discipline-based departments with four schools. The actual delivery of academic programmes still occurred essentially on disciplinary lines, but Heads of Departments chosen by their colleagues were replaced by Heads of Schools who were part of the chain of command of a line-management structure. The replacement of discipline-based departments with schools in a more managerial structure confirms Simon Marginson's insight on the two identities of academics: as practitioners of a specific discipline, whose identity derives from their membership of an internationally networked discipline-based scholarly community, and as employees of a specific higher education institution.⁵ Managers can control the second identity, but not the first, and therefore tend to seek to diminish the salience of the disciplinary identity, which in many cases they do not understand. Reducing the salience of discipline identities downgrades the value attached to academics' specific expertise, and at the same time enhances the authority of managers over people of different discipline backgrounds.

Unlike some universities, which adopted multi-discipline school structures in the hope that it would save on administrative costs, but which retained departmental identities at least for the purpose of external representation and marketing of the disciplines, at UQ the very word "department" was banned by an unwritten edict. All Australian universities have become managerial, but it appears that at some the culture has been more authoritarian than others.

⁵ Simon Marginson, "What's wrong with the universities?", *Blue Book Number Four, Australian Fabian Society Pamphlet*, 59, 2002. See also Howard Guille's paper in this collection and its use of a distinction between the traditional craft-based nature of academic work and the new model of "flexibility" Howard Guille, The Last Post-some industrial and political settings, *Journal of the Public University*, 6, 2008

The 2001 restructure of the University of Queensland Arts Faculty saw positions cut in languages and classics/ancient history, as well as a reduction in general staff positions by voluntary redundancies. The 2001 restructure documents are worth remembering for their finding that Classics offered too much Homer.⁶ There was also a prediction that the temporary thaw in relations between North and South Korea would result in a Korean language boom. Unfortunately for Asian languages, this prediction did not come to pass.

Since the 2001 restructure, the Arts Faculty has experienced further reductions through attrition. The literature section of the English school has been whittled down to about eight positions out of a previous 15. The introduction of the so-called “Enhanced Student Contribution” (i.e. the 25% increase in HECS charges for students) in 2005 has made only a minimal, temporary difference to student-staff ratios in the Arts Faculty. As a general rule, schools keep only 40% of the revenue they generate, in some cases possibly slightly less. Given the different parcels of funding into which school income is divided, some with more or less competitive conditions attached, the actual extent of school funding is anything but transparent, making comparisons of the level of funding between schools complicated. At the same time as funding has become tighter, performance expectations have been ratcheted up over time, intensifying workload pressures even further. Recently, the prospect of a Research Quality Framework exercise has been a stimulus to have some teaching and research staff classified as “teaching-focussed”, getting some staff off the books as far as research performance is concerned, and increasing their teaching workloads, leading to increased segmentation of the academic workforce. The extraction of what may be called “surplus value” from teaching and research academics has become increasingly rigorous, as T & R academics in areas like Arts typically now have to bring in two and a half times as much revenue as their schools retain to pay their salaries.

In 2005/06, the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics (HPRC) underwent another restructure. Professors in History and Religion, and an associate professor in Classics, took voluntary separations. School and Faculty management pushed to make one of the few remaining women in the School above the rank of Level-B Lecturer redundant, but this position was saved after concerted action by her colleagues. (The next year the senior lecturer in question won a large Australian Research Council grant and published a book with a leading scholarly publisher.) The fallout from the restructure included the resignation of a professor in Philosophy, and the departure of a Federation Fellow who had come from North America to work with Philosophy at UQ. (It seems that only the UQ Arts Faculty would view the loss of a Federation Fellow with equanimity). Not long after the restructure, the professor of Classics and Ancient History found a more attractive position in the United Kingdom.

⁶ Classics was directed to “reduce its current emphasis on Homer”. This could well have been code for making a particular staff member redundant, but it remains an indicative case of the philistinism always latent in the new managerialism.

The BA Review

Hard on the heels of the restructure of HPRC, the Arts Faculty undertook a sweeping review of the structure of the Bachelor of Arts. Concurrently, a review of the Bachelor of Science was conducted, which involved exhaustive consultation with affected staff for over a year. In conspicuous contrast to the BSc review, after a brief and vague preliminary consultation period, a small working party was convened, which reported to the President of the Academic Board on 23 December 2005. The report was not tabled at the Academic Board meeting of February 2006, while the Faculty already proceeded to implement the recommendations, with what seemed minimal consultation with the disciplines, whose concerns were largely ignored. About a dozen majors were deleted, and numerous courses culled across the Arts and Social and Behavioural Studies courses. While a case existed in favour of course rationalization, not least on workload grounds, the implementation of the cuts in Arts can be seen as severely top-down, authoritarian and ham-fisted, and a glaring contrast to the more consultative process afforded in the BSc review. The outcome of the BA review was that students ended up with less choice, and a rigid one-size-fits-all template was imposed on majors regardless of intrinsic differences between different fields of study. There was a clear push for more generic, less specialized courses. Replacing specialized courses where the nexus between academics' research expertise and their teaching was organically strongest with more generic courses has the effect of making academic labour more disposable. The delivery of courses becomes less dependent on individual discipline-based expertise, so that it is easier to redeploy other staff to teach them after redundancies, or to casualize course delivery. At the same time, the importance of specialized academic expertise is further downgraded, with managers becoming correspondingly empowered over scholars. Two highly promising historians who had been recruited from North America resigned and returned to North America during the fallout over the BA review, at least partly in protest against the lack of respect of academic expertise demonstrated during the process.

Where to now for Arts at UQ? The Hay system, characterized by an emphasis on “leveraging” outside funding through matching funds raised by “top-slicing” school and faculty budgets has enjoyed demonstrable and tangible successes. But the costs of the system have been less evident as things like staff morale, workload, the quality of the educational experience in ever larger classes, etc., are not as tangible as new buildings. If the pace of “top-slicing” is maintained, questions must arise as to its sustainability. It is not sustainable to continue to spend as much on new buildings as UQ has done over the past few years, even if much of the money has come from outside. A point will be reached at which matching funding can no longer be afforded without doing irreparable damage to the fabric of core elements of the university, like the teaching and research schools of the arts faculty.

Absent a social elite which places value on a liberal arts education as part of the formation of its next generation, the ultimate logic of the corporate university will be that the university may end up as a Big Science technology park, in the service of the bio-tech industry and Big Pharma, with a business school attached. UQ may be approaching a crossroads at which it will have to decide if that is what the community

it is supposed to serve wants from it, or whether it will continue to provide comprehensive educational opportunities for young Queenslanders, including full access to the benefits of humanities and social sciences education. This would require some rebalancing of the university's budget priorities, if only so that the university could continue to benefit from the funding that flows from the work of teaching and research schools across the institution. It would be good to think that this rebalancing might also involve renewed reflection on the value of the humanities and social sciences both for the cultivation and development of students' minds and for the formation of a thinking democratic citizenry. Such has been the overriding economic systemic imperative of the corporate university in the past decade that even formulating this last thought seems rashly utopian.