

The Last Post-Humanities at QUT

Introduction by Howard Guille

Can one imagine an Oxford, a Harvard, an MIT, a Melbourne - in fact any university of good standing, without an arts and humanities program? One might say that QUT is not in this league. Indeed but it will slip back to a technical college status without such programs. (Professor of Social Work at an Australian University, NSW)

A friend that is still in higher education sent a message about QUT's plan to "downsize" humanities - I am absolutely appalled at such a decision which, in effect, demonstrates that QUT is not a university as a basis for a university would be the provision of the fundamental "science" and "arts" faculties. (Senior Economic Policy Officer with an Australian Government)

The papers in this special section are from "The Last Post" forum held at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in November 2007. The forum was the final activity of the School of Humanities and Social Services which was closed at the end of 2007. The closure of the School was made by the QUT Council after an announcement by the QUT Vice-Chancellor in April 2007 to discontinue the Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Social Science (BsocSci) degrees offered by the School. According to the Vice-Chancellor the traditional humanities had no viable future at QUT. This introduction looks at the background, sequence and rationale of the decision to end arts and social science at QUT. The papers themselves look at broader issues of how the basic disciplines have fared in both the corporate enterprise university and the more market-directed education which have developed since the late 1980s. A paper on the threat to the basic sciences has been added to those from the seminar. This paper arose from a submission made about the proposal in early 2008 to reduce the provision of maths and physics at University of Southern Queensland.

Staff, students, the NTEU and the QUT Student Guild ran a very strong public campaign about the fate of humanities. The first objective of the campaign was to ensure rigorous public scrutiny of management justifications to close Humanities. The second was the maintenance of a broad-based and coherent humanities programme of teaching, research and scholarship at QUT on the grounds that these were the base for applied areas like journalism, education, law and Creative Industries. We tried to expose how universities had changed in the era of liberalised markets started by the ALP and continued by the Coalition. It was not a campaign to privilege one brand of humanities over another. Indeed, as this account shows, staff and students are still vulnerable even though the Vice-Chancellor has got his way and amputated a school and a campus. In 2008, the focus turned to the sciences and, unless settings change, the 'new' humanities' of Creative Industries may be next. This collection of papers was stimulated by the exercise of managerial prerogative in one part of QUT but we think they have much wider application in what will be a long struggle about making universities places of reflexive education rather than faux corporations. And to make universities organisations which respect collegiate and shared decision-making rather than the cult of the Vice-Chancellor as brave and fearless leader.

The seminar in 2007 was jointly organised by the staff of the (then) School of Humanities and Human Services and the National Tertiary Education Union. The papers have been compiled and edited by Howard Guille of QUT and Ross Gwyther and Barbara Williams of the NTEU. We would like to thank the speakers, contributors and Margaret Thornton for her support and assistance. And, most importantly, to hope that no more trauma will be visited upon the students and staff of humanities and social science at QUT.

The start of arts at QUT

QUT is a 'new' university formed in the Dawkin's reforms of the 1980s from Queensland Institute of Technology and a major part of Brisbane College of Advanced Education. The former had grown out of the Central Technical Institute and was dominated by engineering, applied sciences and business. BCAE was dominated by education with some business studies and nursing. In the early 1990s, a new Faculty of Arts was established at the new QUT with four Schools covering performing arts, humanities, social sciences (including psychology and human services). The bulk of these except for human services and parts of psychology were constructed from components of the BCAE education programmes. New degrees and diplomas in performing arts, a new BA and a new BSocSci were introduced. The performing arts were at the Kelvin Grove campus on the fringe of the Brisbane central business district. The School of Media and Journalism, which was moved from Business into the Faculty of Arts in the mid-1990s was at the Gardens Point campus next to the Queensland Parliament in the city centre. The Schools of Humanities, Social Sciences and Human Services and the new BA and B Soc Sci degrees were placed at the Carseldine campus in the north of Brisbane 30-40 minutes by car and public transport from the centre.

The BA was initially built around European and Asia-Pacific 'area' studies and Applied Ethics. The former included European and Asian languages, literature and culture (including Australian). In 1997 there was a major rewriting of the degree to emphasise disciplinary studies including Geography, History, and Literature. There were also organisational tensions, seemingly not helped by senior management appointments and resignations, which resulted in the separation of psychology from social sciences and human services and the fusion of social sciences with humanities. Over the same period, humanities and social sciences was physically distant from the mainstream of QUT which developed a strong centralised culture of performance management¹.

The creative reviewer

Periodic review of each faculty and division is part of the performance system and in 1997 the Faculty of Arts was put under the gaze of a UK academic who describes himself as “*among the pioneers of media and cultural studies*”². The reviewer was subsequently appointed as Dean of the Faculty of Arts in early 2000 and presided over the creation of the Faculty of Creative Industries and the disestablishment of the Faculty of Arts which occurred at the end of that year. Creative Industries was based on the academy of performing arts and media and journalism and literature and communication taken from Business and Humanities. Psychology was moved to the Faculty of Health and the remaining areas of humanities, social science and human services forming a new school under the rubric of 'QUT Carseldine'. This was a 'non-faculty' but equivalent to a faculty and charged with providing being *a vehicle for future planning of Carseldine's development*³.

1 Indeed the executive of QUT wrote a self-praise manual which is claimed *to provide an overview of the ways in which the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has sought to develop a culture of performance and client service which enhances the University's strategic position at a time of major change within the higher education sector* 'Performance and Client Service in a Competitive and Rapidly Changing Environment: QUT, DETYA Higher Education Series Report No. 34, 1999. The main editors are Lawrence Stedman & Peter Coaldrake.

2 Prof John Hartley Staff Profile www.creativeindustries.qut.edu.au/about_us/staff-profile/staffDetail.jsp?id=00258300

3 Deputy Vice Chancellor, Creative Industries and Carseldine, Memo to QUT Council, 8 December 2000 available at <http://www.nteu.org.au/bd/qut/humanities/campaign>

The spinning of a new faculty

The Faculty of Creative Industries was based on notions of the 'new economy'. As stated in the 2007 QUT review "*the creative industries concept offers a broader notion of 'creativity' than that normally associated with the arts, one that is more closely integrated with the mainstream commercial world*"⁴. The term is said to have originated with the Blair Government and as a term to have "*impressed QUT's former Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dennis Gibson*"⁵. Nonwithstanding what might be thought about the susceptibility of Vice-Chancellor's to spin, the success of Creative Industries to garner new buildings, research money and accolades has been spectacular. This includes links with the very large urban renewal development of Kelvin Grove Urban Village and the efforts of the Queensland ALP Government to re-engineer Queensland as the "smart state". More generally, creative industries is claimed to be a concept based on cross-disciplinary cooperation and theory-practice integration and to epitomise a new humanities *which resonates with QUT's overall 'real-world' positioning*⁶.

While Creative Industries had the best of location and resources, what was referred to by the current QUT Vice-Chancellor as the "*residual' humanities offerings*"⁷ in the School of Humanities and Human Services at Carseldine formed part of the stand-alone BA and BSocSci and a series of double degrees principally with law and education. The structures of the BA and BSocSci were altered to enable students to transfer more easily to other degrees and to take subjects from other faculties. Such arrangements are common in arts degrees which act as a conduit whereby students explore themselves and their ideas and then either move into more specific areas or stay with arts subjects. However, it had a somewhat perverse effect at QUT as it also allowed the arts degrees to be used as a 'second-choice' means of access to QUT with students transferring to their preferred area – typically psychology or law- after one year. This however, contradicted the way in which these programmes carried, along with the small Bachelor of Human Services, the weight of development of the entire Carseldine campus.

A period of relative calm

From my perspective as union negotiator in discussions over changes which ushered in Creative Industries, the then Deputy Vice-Chancellor (and now Vice-Chancellor) seemed to champion the maintenance and development of Carseldine and seemed less enthusiastic about Creative Industries⁸. This was the opposite of the position of the then Vice-Chancellor who seemed to want the closure of Carseldine. Indeed, the union position at the time was that humanities should not be required to carry the weight of a campus and that the arts degree was more likely to be successful and make a larger contribution to the university as a whole if located at one of the inner city campuses. However, the changes proceeded and the BA & BSocSci were taught on an isolated campus from a School of Humanities and Human Services which was the only academic unit in the 'faculty-like' organisational unit "QUT-Carseldine"⁹. Most other faculties had five or six schools to share the costs of the faculty but the chief source of funds for QUT-Carseldine was the undergraduate teaching load undertaken by Humanities.

The new arrangements began in 2001 and seemed to progress satisfactorily, student target loads

4 QUT Creative Industries Faculty Review Final Report 2-5 April 2007 p14 available at <http://www.nteu.org.au/bd/qut/humanities/campaign>

5 Ibid

6 ibid

7 The statements of QUT Vice-Chancellor (Prof Peter Coaldrake) summarised in the 2007 Faculty of Creative Industries Review p12

8 This view was shared by the work area delegates who were members of the negotiating committee.

9 To underline the complexity of the arrangements, the School of Psychology, part of the Faculty of Health was located at the Carseldine campus but not part of 'QUT-Carseldine'.

were met in all years but one, there was high student satisfaction with the two degrees and a rapid increase in higher degree research students. The campus was refurbished, a new teaching building constructed and promises made to air-condition offices with some \$17 million spent from the late 1990s to date. However funding for teaching was always tight given the reliance on Commonwealth-funded undergraduate students, very limited full-fee paying overseas students and no fee paying postgraduates. But these were the circumstances of humanities and basic science throughout Australia and the School survived, as did those elsewhere by reducing staff numbers by natural attrition. In October 2006, the Vice-Chancellor addressed a meeting of the School and raised concerns about its financial viability and said he was weighing up various options. But, according to staff at the meeting, the Vice-Chancellor was emphatic that there would be 'no slash and bun' and 'no pink slips'. There was no indication that the Vice-Chancellor had lost his enthusiasm to ensure a viable campus in the north of Brisbane.

The Vice-Chancellor changes course

Nothing further was heard until it was discovered, via an administrative inquiry in early April 2007, that the BA had been removed from the list of courses available for students for second semester entry. Under pressure from staff and the NTEU, the Vice-Chancellor & Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) organised a meeting of School staff at less than two days notice and immediately after a Council meeting. The VC announced that he was recommending the discontinuation of the BA and the B.Soc Sci and the closure of the School of Humanities and Human Services. This information was in the Brisbane Courier-Mail in the morning before the meeting occurred. Subsequently a one page statement was emailed to all staff. Nothing was sent to postgraduate or undergraduate students – this was left to the School staff.

The VC's said his reasons for closing the degree were “*the pattern of QTAC first preferences, OP cut-off scores, high attrition, graduate destination (employment) outcomes, and the School's continuing unsustainable financial position*”¹⁰. He also stated that “*the establishment of the Creative Industries Faculty has had a very strong gravitational pull and that QUT's reputation in the humanities is very largely in the creative industries space. We wish to further build upon that strength.*”¹¹ The only evidence provided by the VC to back his case was four power-point slides each with a graph¹². This was provided after the decision to discontinue the degree was announced and analysis. The School analysed the claim and found it wanting – the entrance scores at QUT were higher than the arts degrees at Griffith and at QUT-Ipswich; graduate employment outcomes were worse at Creative Industries and the School was not in deficit if account was taken of the costs incurred by QUT-Carseldine¹³. Moreover, the Vice-Chancellor was taking no account of the disproportionately large number of higher degree research students with the School having around 10% of the total number of research students at QUT.

The public debate about QUT as a tech

The overall sense was that public comments and well-placed media articles seemed more influential than rational evidence. The Vice-Chancellor was supported by the designers of Creative Industries in portraying the BA as 'old humanities' and somewhat of a sheltered workshop which was irrelevant to a 'real-world' university¹⁴. No mention was made of Carseldine and, indeed, the

10 P. Coaldrake, “Future arrangements” Email to qut.cars@qut.edu.au 20 April 2007

11 *ibid*

12 These are available at <http://www.nteu.org.au/bd/qut/humanities/campaign>.

13 School of Humanities and Human Services, Proposal to discontinue the BA & BSocSci and close the School of Humanities and Human Services and other matters Submission to the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), 14 May 2007. Available at <http://www.nteu.org.au/bd/qut/humanities/campaign>

14 See for example, Stuart Cunningham *Taking arts into digital era* Australian Higher Education June 22, 2007 and

university management refused to have this included in the change management discussion with staff and the union.

Likewise, student and staff action were much more potent than internal argument in making issues public¹⁵. The response from the public and other academics was very strong and there was a strong impression that the Vice-Chancellor was damaged by frequent comments that QUT was reverting to a technical college. Students, supported by the QUT Student Guild mobilised about the closure and exerted immense direct pressure on University Academic Board and Council¹⁶. But, and to cut to the quick, the Vice-Chancellor seems to have used salami tactics. Getting rid of the School in 2007 by promising a review as to whether there should be a new degree; moving to close the Carseldine campus in mid-2008 after the School and the humanities students had gone and then getting the decision from the review committee to recommend against a new arts degree.

Yet, the underlying problems continue. The Faculty of Creative Industries at QUT does not have comprehensive studies in history, politics, languages, geography or philosophy and ethics. According to the 2007 review, it has a financial deficit in its teaching programme¹⁷ and the Bachelor of Creative Industries course “*has suffered high student attrition and has had difficulty in delivering on its marketing promise of preparing graduates at the ‘forefront of entrepreneurial, cultural and creative developments’*”¹⁸. As such, if QUT Creative Industries is the 'new' humanities it seems to be having very similar problems to the 'old'. QUT seems to be heading backwards and perhaps its future is as a technical institute. Yet the over-riding ability of the Chief Executive Vice-Chancellor to determine directions seems unchanged and perhaps is even more over-weaning and subject to spin and the personal proclivity of the incumbent.

Hartley & Cunningham

15 See the leaflet “Imagine a university without Humanities” <http://www.nteu.org.au/bd/qut/humanities/campaign>

16 Photographs of the demonstration at UAB were posted to the web as the demonstration was occurring and are probably still available in the archives of Flickr.

17 QUT Creative Industries Faculty Review Final Report op cit p23

18 Ibid p16