

Fahrenheit 420: Burning the Humanities at QUT

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*School is shortened, discipline relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped, English and spelling gradually neglected, finally almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, pleasure lies all about after work. Why learn anything save pressing buttons...?*¹

I faced a dilemma when invited to participate in this seminar. What contribution could I make? What insights could I offer? There were several dangers I wanted to avoid. One was to preach to the converted. We are all strong believers in the value of the arts, humanities, and social science disciplines. There does not seem to be much point in trotting out long-winded justifications. Similarly I wanted to avoid addressing broad issues on which I am insufficiently informed. I am not a trade unionist, even though I have been a card-carrying, dues-paying member of my union for nearly thirty years. I am not an educationalist, even though I have been teaching in tertiary institutions on three continents for thirty-five years. Who then am I and what can I say of relevance to a seminar of this kind? The best way for me to answer these questions is I think to tell my story. If nothing else my testimony can offer yet another perspective on the plight of arts and humanities in Australian universities.

Closing Humanities at QUT was not present at the by now famous meeting of 20 April 2007 where our Vice-Chancellor announced the closure of humanities and the termination of the Bachelor of Arts degree at QUT. The reason is that at 2 pm on that day I was engaged in lecturing and tutoring the over 150 students enrolled in my subject on history and historiography. Of course I had heard rumours that some momentous announcement was in the offing. But I was too busy teaching my oversubscribed classes, trying to make headway with my ARC Discovery funded research projects, and looking after my post-graduate and honours students to pay much attention. I suppose you could say I was complacent. I was confident about my own performance and that of the School. What I had not realised was that on April 20 (the 4/20 of my title, with nod of acknowledgement to Michael Moore and to Ray Bradbury) QUT management would announce a decision to shut us down that had nothing to do with any aspect of performance. Nothing to do with our quite respectable research output; nothing to do with our post-graduate enrolments of circa 100 students; nothing to do with our grant income; nothing to do with our highly positive student responses and evaluations; nothing to do even with our budget balance. The decision to close our School and axe our degree was a purely strategic decision. The purpose behind the move was to position QUT more competitively in relation to what our managers refer to as the education marketplace.

¹ Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1953, pp. 55-56

How does cutting the humanities and social science disciplines from the curricula of a major university help achieve this? Here we need to connect with some of the issues discussed in earlier papers in this collection by Margaret Thornton, Sheila Jefferys, and Andrew Bonnell² which outline some of the forces at work on the national scene: the decline of public funding for universities, the packaging and selling of tertiary education as a commodity, and the competition for international, full fee paying students. But it also needs to be remembered that these issues play themselves out differently within different university contexts. Sandstones like the University of Melbourne or the University of Queensland can to some extent trade on the humanities and social science brand where they have traditional strengths and established reputations. The story is very different in the newer universities, especially those—like QUT—which happen to be located in metropolitan centres where they find themselves in direct competition with the older institutions. The emphasis at places like QUT necessarily falls on distinctiveness vis-à-vis the so-called “traditional university.” QUT dogma is that all programs must be innovative, market sensitive, and distinctive enough to gain a competitive advantage over their most immediate rivals.

Establishing and disestablishing humanities A fair question at this point would be to ask how it came about that QUT decided to establish rather traditional looking Schools of Humanities and Social Sciences when it was first formed. And why the then fledgling institution went through the considerable expense of recruiting senior staff like myself to run these areas in the early 1990s. The answer I think lies in Howard Guille’s notion of the comprehensive university as the dominant model prevailing at that time³. Only later did the idea of the specialist university take hold. For humanities and social sciences at QUT the transition from the one model to the other was inevitably a painful process that stretched out over a decade and more from the mid-1990s to today. Christi Favor outlines some of the stages and permutations along the way⁴. During most of this time the dominant managerial tactic appears to have been something approaching “institutional Darwinism”- throw all the options into the mix and let the fittest (which might also be read as the most unscrupulous) survive. The playing field was of course never going to be a level one. Favoured areas perceived to have a bright future--like media studies, performing arts and others--were allocated prime locations on the downtown campuses at Gardens Point and Kelvin Grove. Humanities and social sciences were relegated to suburban Carseldine. The difficulties of attracting students to the latter campus were and are widely acknowledged; yet no real quarter was ever to be given on that score. Quite amazingly nevertheless, the Bachelor of Arts performed relatively well even with this handicap. The real crunch came in the late 1990s with the decision (again by managerial fiat) to dismantle the Faculty of Arts, and to replace it with a Faculty of Creative Industries, led by a cultural studies guru recruited from overseas.

2 Margaret Thornton, The Decline of the Humanities: are the Humanities Being Singled Out?, Sheila Jefferys, Humanities and the Melbourne Model, Andrew Bonnell, The University of Queensland Arts Faculty: permanent restructure in the corporate university all in *Journal of the Public University*.6, 2008

3 See paper in this collection; Howard Guille, The Last Post-some industrial and political settings, *Journal of the Public University*.6, 2008

4 Christi Favor, Closing humanities at QUT, (either presentation at Last Post Seminar Nov 2007) or *Journal of the Public University*.6, 2008

Creative Industries received massive state government funding and was heavily subsidised by the University⁵. Arguably it corresponded exactly to what QUT regarded as its key priorities: it offered a designer concept that could be conveniently marketed. It had commercial flair. It consisted of a loose conglomeration of arts areas that could be nicely packaged to suit a consumer-driven style of education. It was technology friendly. It was dominated by programs like media and communication studies. These areas claimed to represent the “new” humanities. They stigmatised the more established disciplines like history as “old” humanities, strongly implying that the latter were irrelevant and should therefore be earmarked for extinction. The Creative Industries initiative at QUT dovetailed nicely with the emerging federal government doctrine of specialisation, also known as the diversified sector model of the Australian university system. The key idea here was that universities should specialise in what they could do best. Rather than try to reproduce a full range of disciplines and options, as in the previous comprehensive model, each institution should develop its own specific brand or brands. Within Brisbane the University of Queensland maintains a strong arts presence with a broad range of what our own vice chancellor likes to call “traditional” humanities. The diversified sector doctrine thus dictated that QUT develop an alternative to the “traditional” arts faculty. Creative Industries swiftly became that alternative. It soon stood forth as QUT’s answer to the dilemma as to how best to tailor arts for a competitive educational environment.

The cult of the new

People often ask why the established humanities and social science disciplines at QUT were not simply integrated into the Creative Industries Faculty at its inception. Such a move after all would not have been unusual. There are many precedents across the country for mega arts faculties which combine offerings from a wide range of disciplines. Griffith University for example maintains a Faculty of Arts with Humanities, Communications Studies, Journalism, and Creative Arts all housed under the same roof. Griffith moreover sees the considerable advantages that accrue in such a situation. A recent Griffith ad states that “The University wants to encourage research synergies and collaboration between scholars from traditional disciplines and those from emerging fields such as Journalism, Public Relations, Creative Writing, Cultural Industries, and Digital Domains.”⁶ Such cooperative attitudes have been sorely lacking at QUT. From the beginning it was made clear that the Creative Industries initiative would be the exclusive property of Media and Communication Studies, Journalism, Creative Writing, and the Performing Arts. There would be no place for the established humanities disciplines within its confines. Creative Industries at QUT thus staked its market brand on a policy of radical exclusionism.

According to its leading exponents, Creative Industries does not group knowledge by disciplines at all; it has an applied focus. Yet oddly enough the same exponents also

5 The faculty web-site refers to the creative industries precinct as a \$60m site. <http://www.ciprecinct.qut.com/> (accessed July 2008). It is perhaps not by chance that the web address is qut.com.

6 *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 5 December 2007, p. 28.

argue that a full range of humanities disciplinary knowledge is “embedded” within the various clusters of applied studies. “The humanities,” they write with reference to academic programs within Creative Industries, “are strongly embedded as the disciplinary base of the studies elements”⁷.

This hocus-pocus is apparently meant to refute those who see the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT as little more than a glorified trade school. It also serves to reassure us that at QUT the humanities disciplines are alive and well, albeit “embedded” and largely invisible, within Creative Industries. Nothing could be further from the truth. As any visitor to their web site can easily attest, there is virtually no humanities disciplinary content within Creative Industries, embedded or otherwise. In practice this means that QUT is training our future journalists with no studies in politics, history, economics, or geography. That it is training our future creative writers without a sound basis in literary and cultural histories. That it is training our future artists without reference to art history. And so forth. Perhaps even this could be defended on the grounds of diversity, anti-traditionalism, or sheer philistinism. But what cannot be accepted is the claim that Creative Industries is a new-style, twenty-first century version of an arts faculty. Anyone can see that it offers neither the range nor the depth of disciplinary study that are universally associated with an arts/humanities degree.

None of the above has of course prevented the spin merchants from marketing Creative Industries as QUT’s new look arts brand. Which implicitly makes the humanities and social science degrees offered at Carseldine campus at best a quaint relic from a bygone past, at worst a redundant operation. Performance at this dead end of the spectrum could be construed as an embarrassment, even a potential obstacle to the planned further expansion of Creative Industries. Add to this the Carseldine campus itself, an appendage which QUT wishes to divest itself of at the nearest opportunity⁸. Add all these factors up and you have the strategic decision of 20 April (which coincidentally happens to be Hitler’s birthday) to terminate the humanities disciplines at QUT.

But why after all should such things not happen? Why should QUT not go down this path? Why should it not pursue these policy directions? Is there not some cogency to the specialisation argument? Is it not true that Carseldine remains an unattractive destination for most students? What ultimately is wrong with shutting it down and clearing the way for more focus around the downtown campuses? What is wrong is that in closing humanities QUT will become a university without a Bachelor of Arts degree, and thus without the basic disciplines that necessarily underpin even the professional areas such as Law, Business, Health, Architecture & Design and others. Educational outcomes for QUT students will as a consequence be considerably impoverished. QUT will become a less attractive destination for students wishing to do popular double degrees such as Arts/Law, Arts/Education, Arts/Business.

7 **J. Hartley & S. Cunningham** 'title' (??) *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 30 May 2007. See also Stuart Cunningham, Taking arts into digital era Courier Mail June 22, 2007 where he states “QUT’s philosophy is to embed pure disciplinary inputs into professional applications”.

8 QUT announced the closure of the Carseldine campus in May 2008.

One thing the policy makers too readily forget is that students are quite frequently looking for an education, to go alongside their professional training. They know that the better the quality of their education, the better their credentials, and therefore the more competitive they will be in the job marketplace. They are also curious, and often want to explore unusual or recondite areas of knowledge. In coming to a university, they expect to be able to access studies of this kind and to be taught by qualified specialists. If such opportunities are not available at one university, they will go somewhere else. One of the most popular options for Arts/Law students at the University of Queensland happens to be Ancient History. For twelve years I sat on our humanities booth at QUT's Course and Careers Day. I was always surprised at the numbers of prospective students—often future Law or Education students—who would enquire as to whether we offered Ancient History at QUT. Until now I could report that we did and take them through the course syllabus. Ancient History has in fact been one of our most popular subjects, always attracting around 150+ students each time it was taught. With the closure of the School it will of course be axed.

My question to our Vice-Chancellor is how does a move of this kind enhance the marketability of QUT degrees? How does it augment our competitive edge, even apart from the broader educational arguments that might be invoked? I chose Ancient History as my example. Quite a large number of the students enrolled in that unit are education students, future teachers. I am at a loss to understand where they will now turn to gain their disciplinary knowledge in this key teaching area, or indeed in others. But the same argument applies across a wide range of QUT's academic programs. Take Indigenous Studies. With the closure of our School students will no longer have access to the history discipline. They will thus no longer be able to study, as they do now, the ins and outs of the "history wars" in depth.. They will no longer be able to read the works of Henry Reynolds and other outstanding historians from a critical perspective informed by disciplinary understandings. And I could go on in this vein for some time. There are so many other instances I could mention, such as for example the case of Applied Ethics in the Health profession, the case of Politics and Sociology for Business, the case of Geography for Built Environment and Engineering.

The point, however, is always the same: the closure of humanities and social sciences will severely curtail the educational opportunities available for students at QUT. Our students know this, which is why they organised a sustained series of massive demonstrations and disruptions across all the QUT campuses over a period of months, as the Vice-Chancellor's decision was being rubber stamped by various university committees. People were surprised by the magnitude of the student protests that swept across the city. At one point the students managed to sustain the levels of noise and shouts for hours, drowning out the conduct of business in an academic board meeting where the future of humanities was being discussed. On another occasion the police were called in. Several students were forcibly dragged away, kept under watch in a safe house, and charged with offences. Meanwhile the Vice-Chancellor began surrounding himself with a ~~gown~~ squad of security guards when on visits to campuses. The virulence of the student response clearly took top level management by surprise. No doubt the managers and administrators had forgotten that students existed at all, other than as numbers to crunch into dollars at enrolment time. But the students were

right to remind the corporate directorship of their rights and to make their voice heard. They were right because the university belongs to them, exists for them, and must service in the first instance their needs if it is to accomplish its educational mission.

Student anger over the closure of humanities and social sciences was fully justified. Students immediately recognised this move for what it was: an attack on educational opportunities which once closed off, will devalue QUT degrees across the board. QUT graduates in all fields now risk being educationally disadvantaged in the face of their peers from other more fortunate universities. They will have been deprived of the chance to pursue in depth study in humanities and social science disciplines like history, geography, politics, and sociology, to mention only a few of those soon to be counted as missing in action. As a consequence they will face seriously diminished career prospects, truly an odd outcome for a university that claims to equip students to compete successfully in the real world.