

The last post: From the ‘modern’ to the ‘postmodern’ University

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... the ‘modern university’ as it existed for most of the twentieth century has given way to a very different ‘postmodern’ institution lacking clear goals and functions besides generic utilitarian ones. And...this utilitarian model is incompatible with the goal and functions of the modern university (Keith Tribe, 2004: 607).

Abstract

This paper takes Keith Tribe’s provocative thesis of the shift from a “modern” to “postmodern” universities in England and applies it to the history of universities in Australia. Tribe argues that the modern university in England developed over 200 years, built around academic research and teaching, and these imperatives shaped the governing structures of the universities, with senior academics overseeing the programs and directing the institution via a Senate type structure¹. The universities were for the students of the elite, for employment in the upper strata’s of society. This university system in general emerged in a historical dialogue between the United Kingdom, Continental Europe and the United States in the period between 1700 and 1940s. According to Tribe following World War II, this modern university system began to gradually unravel, under the pressure of mass enrolments and chronic under-funding. By the 1980s, universities were in a financially parlous condition. The Thatcher government exacerbated the under-investment in university funding but paradoxically was keen to micro-manage university practices. To survive this financial predicament, universities transformed themselves into top-down institutions and in the process lost their research and teaching purposes and along with it academic governance. These universities had the appearance of modern universities but behind the façade they were now postmodern, the imperative of financially survival and top-down management over-rode the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

The paper outlines the argument made by Tribe on the change from modern to postmodern universities in England and then argues that the thesis has heuristic value when applied to the history of universities in Australia. The paper contends that the parallel between the British and the Australian university experience is striking, in no small part because Australian universities were based on their U.K. counterparts but

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¹ Keith Tribe “Education Economic”, *Economy and Society*, Volume 33, Number 44, November 2004, pp. 605-620. It is important to note that the term England is used here as that is basically Tribe’s reference point but the British Education Department has historically covered both England and Wales, but not Scotland (and Northern Ireland is a special case).

also because Australian government policies, from the 1980s to today, tended to mirror many (but not all) of the policies and ideologies of those in U.K. In Australia, the under-funding of universities began to have affect by the 1980s, a series of reforms similar to that in the U.K. brought about a similar transformation from modernist to postmodernist universities. What was striking about the Australian process was the government's brazenness in destroying the modernist university and how timid the resistance was to the advent of a postmodern university by the vice chancellors.

The English Postmodern University

This paper takes Keith Tribe's provocative thesis of the shift from a "modern" to "postmodern" universities in England and applies it to the history of universities in Australia. For Tribe, universities in England have been transformed from institutions whose purpose was to pursue teaching and research, as decided by the collective academic body, to one that is directed by managerial strata, which is minimally accountable to the staff or the university council. He argues that following World War II, tertiary education in the U.K. became a reality for many more students but that respective government never properly funded this evolution. As a result, by the 1980s, universities were more concerned about their financial survival than their research purpose. As universities sought to deal with under-funding, governance by academics was pushed aside by executive management seeking to anticipate market signals. Moreover, universities lost their independence as they sought to respond to each and every financial incentive offered by government. In addition, Tribe notes that the Thatcher Government's depletion of university coffers made them ever ready to accept readily the Blair government's introduction of student fees.²

Tribe distinguishes between the modern and the post-modern university by reference to the following features. The modern university was very vocational in structure and taught four basic courses, of philosophy, theology, medicine and law. It produced graduates for an elite employment market notably in: teaching, the religious orders, medicine, the judiciary and the public service. The level of fees paid by students and restrictive prerequisites such as in Latin or Greek, ensured that the students came from privileged backgrounds. The lecturers were research focused with their teaching following their research and often producing manuscripts from their lectures. For instance, Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* stemmed from his 1750s Glasgow lectures³. According to the modern university only emerged in its recognisable form at the turn of the 20th Century. He argues that the modern university appeared firstly, in the United States, where philanthropy and government support saw universities founded on the principle of research. Overall the English university system developed in different ways and, for example, Oxford and Cambridge were transformed from religious training institutions into modern universities by the broadening of the teaching courses and with the 'honours degree' as the marker of research capacity. In these two universities, academic management

² Ibid., 614.

³ Ibid., 607.

was built around a college system, which was the basic unit of financial accounting and academic leadership. In contrast to Oxford and Cambridge, the U.K. 'red brick' universities founded in the nineteenth century and early 20th Century were modern universities from their outset with a syllabus based on academic research and governed at all levels from the discipline up to the Senate by academic leaders.

A new component was introduced to the U. K. university system in 1988 when the *Education Reform Act* removed the polytechnics and colleges of higher education from under Local government authority to an independent status, therein presenting the opportunity for the Central government to transform them into universities. In 1992, the Major government ushered through Westminster the *Further and Higher Education Act*, which abolished the binary divide bringing the polytechnics and some colleges into the university system. But, while they took the title university, they were less research focused and more vocational. Unlike the older universities there was no history of academic self-governance, or a strong independence from government. On the other hand, the polytechnics and colleges were a vital part of the higher education system providing an essential service for many students, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and for mature aged students

Between 1988 and 2001, the U.K. higher education system tripled in size but the level of funding per student fell by half.⁴ Alison Wolf calculates that public funding per student halved between 1980 and 2002.⁵ Compounding the under-investment was the increased level of government micro-management of universities. The process of change that had begun under the Conservatives continued under the Blair Labour Government, which strengthened state control over universities but gave them the opportunity to charge fees. In 1997 the Blair government commissioned the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to conduct audits into administration, subjects and research. In response to this intensification of pressure from the outside, and the introduction of what Michel Foucault calls "technologies of power" in to the universities the system of governance became corporate rather than collegial⁶. To a greater and lesser extent, line management displaced senior academics as the source of strategic direction for the university and Academic Boards were subordinated to the strategic power of the executive managers. Thus, the Vice Chancellor was no longer an academic leader but was a Chief Executive Officer running a large educational corporation, called a university.

Tribe argues that financial imperatives produced a shift from research based teaching, aiming at building a mature scholar, to generic training seeking to meet the employment market. He suggests that universities readily market their research standing through such prestigious programs as the training of doctors and medical specialists as it is these fields where public opinion is strongest. However, beneath this public relations representation of research, like teaching the research efforts were subordinated to the senior manager's responses to the chronic under-investment in the

⁴ Robert Stevens, *University to Uni: The Politics of Higher Education in England since 1944*, London: Politico's, 2004, pp.68.

⁵ Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth*, London: Penguin, 2002

⁶ Michel Foucault, "Governmentality" in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell *et al*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991, pp.87-104

university and the government's relentless micro-management of all aspects of the university.

Moreover, the Blair government regarded universities as agencies for translating research into wealth and international market opportunities. As such university research had instrumental and not intrinsic value.⁷ Nevertheless, the Blair government came to recognise the serious decline in university funding, illustrated by the fact that the U.K spends only 1.1 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product on higher education as compared to 2.9 per cent in the U.S. They responded by promoting institutional diversity in teaching and research via student fees and competitive research allocations. Additionally, in response to the serious decline in research output, the government introduced a full-cost research initiative, accompanied by highly intrusive forms of micro-management, espoused as providing transparency (Transparency Approach to Costing).

For Tribe the loss of a modernist purpose was compounded by the mismatch between schools and universities⁸. He argues this occurred in two ways. One was duplication in subject knowledge between senior school A-levels and first year university offering. The other was that school subjects did not meet the requirements of some university courses, especially in science and mathematics. Tribe sees this problem as caused by "premature specialisation" by students in the midyears of schooling, which weakens the knowledge capacity for later learning, he writes:

Whereas the specialization of the modern university presupposes a preparation in common school core curriculum, the fragmentation of this core curriculum has been associated with the development of a utilitarian 'vocationalism' in which it is generic skills, rather than specific capacities, that are considered the appropriate 'learning outcomes'⁹.

As a consequence of this vocationalism, he considers that students are confused over what benefits universities give them in terms of knowledge, seeing universities more in terms of "personal development" rather than "intellectual growth and maturity"¹⁰.

In sum, in Tribe's schema the postmodern university is the product of a loss of the supremacy of research and its corollary academic governance by academics. These were supplanted by managerialism, accompanied by a loss of university independence from government. This shift was compounded by the problematic interplay between schools and university curriculum. The consequence Tribe argues is that most universities are no longer shaped by research but by strategic missions wrought by the imperative to survive in a competitive market for domestic and overseas students. They have become postmodern institutions.

Since Australian universities have been transformed in very similar ways to those in England, the notion of a post-modern university in this country seems equally relevant. The older Australian universities, which now form the Group of Eight, were based on the United Kingdom model and were established to train the elite in the

⁷ Op.cit, Wolfe

⁸ Op.cit., Tribe p. 612

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 613.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

classics and mathematics and equip them for leadership roles in the professions. Academics were offered a research sabbatical on a regular basis, so they could return from the colony to the metropolis to retain their research status. The range of courses increased and the universities operated under the leadership of the senior academics which was often exercised through a vibrant Academic Board and Senate. A range of new outer-metropolitan universities were established in the 1960s to meet the growing demand for student places. These were structured on the modernist form of academic research and governance. The 1987 Dawkins' reforms brought the colleges of advanced education and the institutes of technology into the university system though these institutions did not have a modernist history or structure.

The fusion was complex with some 'new' universities formed entirely from former colleges and institutes but also considerable amalgamations between former universities and colleges. Those new universities formed entirely from colleges and institutes did not have the same historical sense of respecting research and scholarship (even though many academics in these institutions were research active) or formal academic leadership or the same degree of independence from State governments. In the end all the universities were transformed by a multi-pronged process of under-funding, government micro-management and a management revolution from within, which sapped the purpose of the universities, turning them into postmodern artefacts.

The Australian post-modern university turn

The Bob Hawke Labor Party Government was elected to office in 1983, the university system retained much of its modernist structure, universities were free for students and 90 per cent of the costs were met from the public purse. The Commonwealth Government set the global number of student places and the level of funding but the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC), was the overarching body controlling higher education and acted as a buffer between universities and the government. There was a binary divide between universities and vocational institutions. However, by 1986, the Hawke government, principally through its Education Minister John Dawkins had arrived at a new model based on the view that mass tertiary education should principally serve the economy.

The Dawkins' reforms eliminated the binary division between research universities and vocational orientated institutions, abolished CTEC, and placed all the universities under the ambit of the Commonwealth department of education. Unlike in the U.K. where there was certain sense of cordiality between the vice-chancellors and the education department, in Australia, the department did not act as a buffer between the minister and the university; rather the department was often as hostile to the universities as its minister. To assist in funding this expansion, the government introduced a Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) in 1989. In this model, students were constructed in terms of human capital theory, where university education was conceptualised as a private economic benefit to the student and therefore should not be free¹¹. Universities were considered as vocational trainers of

¹¹ Simon Marginson, "Higher Education" in Robert Manne (ed.) *The Howard Years*, Melbourne: Black Inc. ,2004, p.218

students for an ever changing labour market and as a means of augmenting wealth through turning research into marketable advantage for Australian capital.

At the executive level universities began to be transformed by this process. They became business corporations responding both to the government's relentless directives and the need to attract HECS paying students¹². Like the U.K., the vice chancellors became CEOs divorced from the academic community. As responding to market signals became all-important, universities invested the senior management with overall setting and what was termed strategic planning rather than have it emanate from below. As a result, academics lost their traditional collegiate forms of government; for example, academic boards and the Senate were emasculated (or disappeared altogether). University councils were also disempowered and did not hear the views of academics and the professional staff. Instead they became forums where the CEO/Vice Chancellor could channel the corporate and political voices of the city in the interest of the university

The changes were resisted by the staff and the unions but to little avail. Many academics felt, as Raymond Gaita stated that universities had surrendered too meekly to government demands. He bemoaned the loss of learning for its own sake rather than for vocational ends.¹³ Ian Hunter was more circumspect and argued it was a perversion of the historical function of universities during modernisation, to draw a contrast between universities pursuing values over vocation. Moreover, he argued that those who defended universities as institutions of inquiry provided easy political fodder for the Labor Government, depicting it as a form of elitism, which no longer conducive to a global education market.¹⁴

When the Keating government was defeated in 1996 many universities considered that a Liberal government might return to the modernist university model, consolidated by Robert Menzies in the 1950s. As a consequence, many vice chancellors found the savagery of the financial attack on universities surprising. Howard's first minister of education, Amanda Vanstone reduced university-operating grants by 5%, the long-term effect of which was that universities became driven by the imperative to achieve financial stability. The government made it clear that universities would have to rely on the HECS payments to fund their student load and to do more with less public funds. More generally, the Howard Coalition Government did not reverse the transformation but used under-funding, ideological confrontation and relentless forms of micro-management to continue the process started by Labor and so ensured that the universities were postmodern. In addition, Howard and his close Ministers and supporters had little sympathy for universities regarding much of the Humanities and Social Sciences as on the wrong side of his cultural wars¹⁵. Whereas Thatcher had used funding formulas to starve the

¹²Simon Marginson, and Mark Considine (*The Enterprise University: power, governance and reinvention in Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); . Tony Coady, (ed.), *Why Universities Matter*, St Leonards: Allen &Unwin 2000.

¹³ Raymond Gaita, "Breach of Trust: truth Morality and Politics, *Quarterly Essays*, Volume 270: 2005

¹⁴ Ian Hunter, "Personality as a Vocation: The Political Rationality of the Humanities" in Ian Hunter, Denise Meredyth, Bruce Smith and Geoff Stokes, *Accounting for the Humanities: the language of culture and the logic of government*, Brisbane: Griffith University: 1991, pp.7-67

¹⁵ Anna Clark, *History's Children: History Wars in the Classroom*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008

humanities, Howard added overt challenges to their research and teaching programs to the pressure of under-investment.

In overall terms, between 1995 and 2003 there was a 7 per cent decline in public expenditure on higher education in Australia, compared to a rise of 49 per cent across the OECD. In short, Australian universities came to rely for 38 per cent of their income from student fees and charges, 14 per cent of which was from overseas students and 16 per cent through the HECS fee process. The total level of expenditure increased from \$8B in 1996 to \$14B in 2005, however, the vast bulk of that increase was from both HECS and overseas students, with the government persistently under-investing in universities¹⁶.

Paradoxically by the end of the Coalition Government, Australian universities relied less on public funds but were even more heavily micro-managed and criticised by the Howard government. The government began to intervene in all levels of Australian universities by the tying of funding to government requirements, including the curriculum. Following the U.K. model the Howard government in 2006 introduced a Research Quality Framework (RQF) exercise to measure the quality of research outputs. Like the U.K. Research Assessment Exercise, the RQF sought to reward the research-leading universities by tying funding to a ranking system. But unlike its U.K. counter-part the RQF had the additional task of assessing the impact of research on Australian industry and society, this was interpreted as seeking to buy-off the technological universities who would lose out in research ranking exercise but could gain in impact.

Australia's post-modern university

The post-modern turn in Australian universities was most evident under Education, Science and Training Minister Brendan Nelson (2001-2006). Upon taking on the portfolio, Nelson established a review, entitled *Higher Education at the Crossroads*, which concluded that the sector was in dire needs of more funding. But Nelson interpreted this solution not as a call for more money but for radical restructuring, arguing that Australia only needed a small number of 'world class' universities, perhaps two. On 13 May 2003 Nelson released his blueprint for education, called *Our Universities: backing Australia's future*. University funding was still to be based on user-pays student fees backed up by minority public funds. Showing his total disregard for university independence, Nelson tied additional funding to the requirement that the universities implemented the government's industrial relations policies, titled Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) and the adoption of a business model of governance (reducing University Councils to a fixed corporate template, specifically aimed at removing academic influence on councils).

Following the 2004 election, when the Howard government gained control of both Houses of Parliament, the first piece of legislation brought forward was the Nelson package. The introduction of the High Education Workplace Relations Requirements

¹⁶ National Tertiary Education Union, *State of the Sector*, 2007

in April 2005 had as its target the destruction of the culture of collegiality as it sought to turn individual academics into market subjects. Moreover, Nelson proselytised the new laws in terms of creating industrial “flexibility”, which was a coded word for direct attacks on the collective agreements between universities and unions on behalf of the staff, which the Minister deemed as both rigid and too union friendly. Under the Nelson legislation, management were charged by the Minister with the task of setting the conditions of employment, based on AWAs, and the institutions were badgered by the Department of Education, Science and Training to acquiesce to the Minister’s demands. Even university management considered that this was a step too far and nearly all universities resisted the individual contract system promoted by Minister Nelson though they did not resist his strictures on limiting the role of unions, notably the NTEU, on university campus and in collective agreements. .

Another and more pernicious abrogation of the principles of the modern universities was Nelson’s interference in the independent peer review process of research grants, when he vetoed peer review grants approved by the autonomous Australian Research Council. This is perhaps best seen as interference in academic freedom for reasons of ideology and political opportunism. It seems as if there was collusion between the Minister and sections of the ‘right-wing’ media to attack research deemed to be against the government’s ideological agenda. According to Stuart Macintyre, the right-wing political commentator Andrew Bolt (*Herald Sun*, 19 November, 2003) criticised a number of the 2003 ARC grants as “pointless” research¹⁷. The following year Education Minister Nelson vetoed three grants that had been awarded by the ARC humanities panel via its peer-review process, leaking this fact to Andrew Bolt¹⁸.

When news filtered out of the Minister had vetoed the grants there was overwhelmingly academic and union disapproval of the Minister’s actions and what was seen as blatant ministerial abrogation of the very essence of academic research. However, what was remarkable about this incident was how timid was the response from the universities, the ARC and the peak bodies. Emboldened by the lack of effective opposition, Minister Nelson went further in his attack on academic peer assessment by insisting that the ARC Board install a “community vetting” process for ARC grants. The Board refused. Nelson then appointed his own vetting group, comprising High Court judge Sir Daryl Dawson, the right-wing editor of the conservative journal *Quadrant* P.P McGuinness and television personality Ross Symonds.

In the 2005 ARC round McGuinness told the media that he had attempted to overturn 27 individual ARC projects. In the end, Minister Nelson vetoed 7 grants, three of which were in McGuinness’s list¹⁹. The head of the ARC, Professor Peter Høj reported to Senate Estimates, that Minister Nelson had defended the vetoes, as the grants he said were “not of national benefit”²⁰. A Freedom of Information application (which the government sought to thwart) uncovered the facts that what is meant by the phrase ‘national benefit’ is what was determined by Liberal Party ideology and political opportunism. For instance, one grant vetoed was exploring how environmental

¹⁷ Stuart Macintyre “Universities”, in Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison, *Silencing Dissent* (eds.) Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007, p. 42

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

movement and respective lobby groups influenced government policy, including that of the Howard government. Another grant vetoed was examining how government's manage the media when scandals emerge, including the Whitlam government's purchase of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* and the Howard government's "children overboard" incident.

In light of this example, one needs only to recall, J.S. Mill's annunciate principles in *On Liberty*, where he warns of the "rags and remnants of persecution" evident in the derision of the thoughts of others, to realise how far the Liberal government has abandoned the philosophical roots of a modern university²¹. Rather the government assumed that university research, notably in the Humanities and Social Sciences, was post-modern and therefore could be vilified without any respect for the researcher's pursuit of truth²². While the universities expressed disquiet at Nelson's attack on the very foundations of research, they proved how postmodern they were by being ineffectual against a direct challenge to their supposed modernist purpose; independent research.

In summary, the Nelson program conforms to the view that Australian universities had become post-modern rather than modern. Nelson had shown no respect for academic research, the independence of University Council, and the independent relationship between management and staff. Whereas the English approach to the transformation of the modern to the postmodern university was achieved via funding and micro-management, the Australian process combined these more subtle tools with naked bullying. What Nelson revealed was that when confronted by a direct challenge to the modernist principles of university existence, university CEOs in Australia were ever ready with the platitudes of research independence but these were not backed by decisive action. Such hollow rhetoric is further evidence that research freedom was an artefacts of the postmodern university.

The election of the Rudd government has been accompanied by conflicting messages over the postmodernist university. For example, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Kim Carr has affirmed that the government will not veto any of the ARC research grant decisions. He replaced the RQF impact model with a U.K.-like metric model, called Excellence in Research for Australia. On the other hand, the Cutler Review, established by Carr to examine the National Innovation System, is driven by the objective of increasing economic productivity. In return for the promise of more funding, universities are expected to harness research to enhance value adding in industrial output. For her part, Minister Gillard, whose ministry is Education, Employment, Workplace Relations and Social Inclusion, has commissioned the Bradley Review into tertiary education, which has in its objective the principle of "contestability" between all higher education providers, therein following a post-modern agenda of blurring the distinction between research-based universities and other higher and tertiary education institutions. Likewise, Gillard's preference for a U.K. based funding founded on mutually agreed mission statements, covering four categories: research, teaching, innovation and social inclusion, may

²¹ John Stuart Mill. "On Liberty", in *Utilitarianism*, ed. Mary Warnock, New York: World Publishing Company, rp. 1971, pp.150..

²² Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe *The Times Will Suit Them: postmodern conservatism in Australia*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2008.

well continue to undermine university autonomy. As such, the post-modernist university will persist for the foreseeable future.

Finally, there is clear evidence that the mismatch between school and universities curriculum, identified by Tribe in England, is equally evident in Australia. This mismatch is in no small part due to the dislocation caused to university curriculum by the loss of fulltime staff over the last 20 years of government disinvestment in higher education. The mismatch is partly behind the Universities of Melbourne and Western Australia turning to U.S. based double-degree curricula. However, given the limited student market in Australia this may well lead to these universities reinforcing their elitism at the expense of other universities, without fundamentally addressing the mismatch between duplicated subjects or school choices taken by students that do not give them the capacity to undertake subjects in science and mathematics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, under pressure to deal with declining government funds and increased government micro-management, Australian universities have become postmodern entities, with their top-down management responding to the contingencies of funding. As in England, the major transformation of the Australian universities from modernist to postmodernist has occurred over the last 30 years, driven by government policies²³. The pervasive governmental disregard for the modernist foundations of universities, placed universities in an invidious position, always having to defend even the basis of academic freedom and institutional independence, whilst ever reliant on declining public funds. The paradox of the Howard years for universities was the fact that there was a quantitative decline in government funds with a relentless intervention in institutional policies, practices and direction. Moreover, what characterised the Howard years was the overt manner by which the modernist purpose of the universities was treated with disdain by respective minister, most notably by Brendon Nelson and how the postmodern universities were ineffectual in resisting government power.

The election of the Rudd government has brought the promise of more funding but also a wide range of reviews, all of which imply further government infringement on universities. Paradoxically, there is a tension between the postmodern university and the renewed search for truth in the Humanities and Social Sciences. This is a search for meaning in an era of imperial power that calls forth the need to explain global and local material acts in terms of new humanist ideals²⁴. In this view postmodernism has exhausted its radical deconstruction of modernism and there is new search is for eternal truths that will expose the gaps in our understanding; so as to ensure the current malaise in radical thought is not actually the last-post. This renewed pursuit of fundamental truths may well revitalise the postmodern university in spite of its corporate structure

²³ Carol Johnson, *Carol Governing Change: From Keating to Howard*, St Lucia: Queensland University Press Gwyneth; Singleton, (ed.) *The Howard Government*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, (2000); Robert Manne (ed.) *The Howard Years*, Melbourne: Black Inc. 2004, pp.3-57. Alain Badiou *Polemics*, London: Verso, 2006, p.136.

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