

Submission to the Review on Higher Education Financing and Policy

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haec quippe prima sapientiae clavis definitur, assidua scilicet seu frequens interrogatio (Abelard Sic et Non).

We enclose the following response to the Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy, 'Learning for Life', in particular to Chapter 1 "A Fresh Vision for Higher Education". This response will come under the rubric 'Higher Education', its nature and meaning, which does not appear to have been considered, or was considered and rejected, by the Committee. The Committee's work is important for the future of Higher Education in this country, that is beyond the sluggish economic conditions of the 1990s, and it is critical we do not lose sight of the western liberal tradition of education, by recognising, by sustaining, by nurturing the special society of masters and students that is a university. Thus, we consider the nature of the University itself in its historical perspective, before turning to some implications for the role of Higher Education in Australian society.

Learning, or training as it was then, was undertaken in the monasteries and Cathedral schools of early Medieval Europe. The subjects taught were the seven liberal arts inherited from the ancient world: grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Noble as these pursuits were, they had been sapped of intellectual vibrancy by the thorough Christianisation of Europe which meant that the highest form of knowledge was belief, in effect a "glass ceiling" beyond which questions were not asked. No-one grappled with the meaning of the physical and metaphysical world because there was no need. There was a blueprint for understanding meaning in the creed of the Church, to be learned, to be repeated, to be adhered to. Dogma, creed, repetition, training, all are valid key words for learning in the European Dark Ages.

A number of factors in the twelfth century exploded as a starburst in the European imagination: a new world of intellect and culture challenged the Crusaders in the Holy Land, trade and town life revived, and of most significance, the Classical authors of Greece and Rome were read in a new light, not for rules of grammar, but for the spark of imagination which flickered in the dark-age mind. A cleric in medieval Paris, a lover of wisdom (a philosopher), Peter Abelard, was the first to teach the logic he found in Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher and physical scientist. Observing the pronouncements of the Church Fathers were often in conflict, Abelard taught understanding through empirical observation and reason. The

student must analyse the sources to see whether the text has been corrupted, then he (all were male) must be exposed to contradictory opinions in order to evaluate their worth. Abelard's book *Sic et Non* (Yes and No) set out 158 points of Christian ethics in contradiction. He did not propose answers, that he left to his students' power of reason. Abelard taught questions.

Abelard's method was revolutionary and despite initial opposition, it became the hallmark of the scholarly discourse in the emerging societies of masters and students in the twelfth century, which came to be called "Universities". Even the Church, which had originally opposed the new method of analysis, came to embrace it through the labour of Thomas Aquinas. Abelard himself set up his own school on the west bank of the Seine which attracted students from all over Europe. The society that emerged from this was an amalgam of the institution of the Cathedral school and the new logical framework, rediscovered by Abelard, for understanding humanity. Abelard's society gave rise to the Sorbonne and it and those like it came to be known as "Universities".

We see from this that Universities are by *their very nature* theoretical societies, societies of abstract thought, societies of critical analysis. The point of this is that the very definition of a University, the very basis of western thought, stems from Classical Greek thought, from reason and empirical observation, from subtlety and nuance. It stems from 'Yes and No', not the 'Yes or No' of ignorance and indoctrination.

This has implications for Australian society. The belief that Universities should be centres of so-called 'vocational education' cuts into the heart of a University. "'Vocational education" itself is an oxymoron, as meaningless as "defence initiative", "negative growth t' or Undiplomatic coercion". *Vocation* derives from the Latin verb *vocare*, "to summon", and it implies a calling in the same way one learns the central tenets of dogma in the sphere of religion. As with any religious adherence to truisms in life, facts and their practical application are supreme. Authority is greater than reason. diplomatic coercion"

Education implies otherwise. The word comes from the Latin preposition *e*, meaning "out of", and the verb *ducere*, "to lead". *Education* is to draw forth the inherent qualities in a person, to strengthen the powers of the mind. Inherent in the word is the implication that reason, thought, critical analysis, are greater than authority.

True to the university's historical development, the essence of any graduate is the free-range mind, the ability to think critically and analytically, to weigh up different points of view, to communicate ideas clearly and concisely. There is irony in that some in business on the one hand seek Universities to be centres of vocational

training, on the other they bemoan the lack of the above attributes in their graduates. The relevant, realworld fact of the matter is that they are more likely to find these qualities of reasoning, thought, and critical analysis in a graduate of Classics, presently being destroyed, than one with a degree in human resource management.

The free-range mind equips the graduate with inherent communicative and critical facilities to rise to the top of any profession. The reliance is not on repetition, facts, and formula but on adaptability and imagination and the ability, not only to acquire knowledge, but to be able to evaluate critically the validity of that knowledge. Only after knowledge is analysed and evaluated can it be Applied' to questions and problems in circumstances which may never be the same. These are requirements that are vital in a technological age where the subject is confronted with limitless information that has to be sifted and managed (such as the Internet). Facts that are required for a job are to be acquired on the job, particularly in this modern age when no two jobs for the university graduate are identical and when each company is set on distinguishing itself from its competitors and on tailoring the workplace to suit individual needs. Business itself has a responsibility to train its new employees, the resource which is supposed to provide the so-called unique competitive edge. Why then are universities urged to turn out graduates who have lost this uniqueness through relying on formulaic repetitions and facts memorised in isolation from any analytical framework, graduates who are praised for the ability to peck and produce as hens in a battery cage?

There is of course the opinion that the downturn in the economy in Australia is more pressing than the critical way of thinking discovered two and a half thousand years ago by the Ancient Greeks and the intellectual tradition of the University created eight hundred years ago that has made a definitive contribution to the depth and vibrancy of western civilisation. This opinion has prompted narrow proclamation of small-minded provincialism, that universities must be 'relevant' to the real world". We pass over the vacuous slogans, shallow catchcries and meaningless rhetoric of political imperative and vested interest. "Relevance" is an elastic and empty deity so fickle that it cannot be a foundation of future planning because today's relevance, by its very logic, will not be tomorrow's. And the 'real world, turns out to be someone's electorate. We suggest, as educators, that "intelligence", its recognition and its enhancement be the basis on which the future of the university system is planned.

The two peaks of intellectual endeavour - reason and empirical observation - come under the rubric research. Surely a university has the dual responsibility of *protecting existing knowledge and acquiring further knowledge* by extending that which already exists by posing questions and seeking answers through research and critical analysis. Surely lecturers have the responsibility to think about what they teach rather than convey, as empty vessels, other people's ideas. If economic arguments drive universities today, then to use

appropriate business terminology, this can be equated with the promotion of research and development and the managing of that resulting intangible resource, knowledge, as a source of innovation and conversion. Knowledge is fast being recognised by the business world as at least as important a resource as those which are tangible, hence the birth of Peter Senge's Learning organisations'. It is the managing of existing knowledge that universities are ignoring and which will be lost. By logical progression, if knowledge is lost, it cannot serve as a starting point from which questions are posited and new ideas developed; research cannot therefore extend it and this dual reason for a university's existence is no more.

We write as two younger academics from dissimilar departments (History and Management) who are concerned about the direction suggested by "Learning for Life", because it devalues ideas, the ideas we love to teach. The university is the real world, expansive in space and time. The university must encompass the rigour of the liberal humanist tradition and instil the intellectual capabilities to deal with our modern, pluralist society. It must break down prejudice and intolerance by encouraging independent thought and critical analysis. We are sure the Committee does not want to hammer flat thinking and imagination on the anvil of the applied fact. But by seeking to attain an amorphous post-secondary education environment, the Committee is not only failing to understand the nature and role of universities but is also devaluing the technical skills acquired by students at those institutions which specialise in vocational training, namely the technical and further education institutes. We urge the Committee to reconsider its recommendations in light of appreciation of the special mission of the University to teach the thinkers of tomorrow.

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