

RESPONSE TO THE WEST COMMITTEE'S DISCUSSION PAPER

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I want to comment on only two aspects of the Discussion Paper: (i) the concept or definition of a university, which some commentators say is missing from the Paper; (ii) the concept of distance education, with which the paper is much concerned (Appendix 11 even more so).

What is a university?

It would be possible to spend many fruitless hours discussing what a university is, or should be. There are many types of university in the world. I suggest that the most fruitful approach is to look at how the university came into being in the Middle Ages, and see what characteristics have continued since then, whatever accretions have been heaped on universities since that time.

The three earliest universities were those of Bologna, Paris and Montpellier. Montpellier had few if any imitators. Bologna was in its beginning a "university of students" where the students, all of mature age, hired and strictly controlled the teachers; in time it, and all European universities, became a "university of masters" on the model of Paris, which is the real mother of all universities.

The best description of the embryonic University of Paris is in John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon*, book II, chapter 10. John went to Paris as a youth to further his own learning, having heard of the brilliant assembly of scholars teaching there, and he tells us of his masters and his experiences. This chapter is an account of the very beginnings, and Rashdall's extended study of the medieval universities describes the later development of Paris and her imitators.

Paris grew out of a few schools which taught the liberal arts, especially grammar, logic and rhetoric, to equip a young man for a career in religion or administration or teaching. Students congregated there because of the reputation of some teachers; teachers congregated there because there were many students, all paying fees, and thus both fortune and reputation could be made there. The same had happened in the so-called "universities of the ancient world" from the 4th century BC onwards, when students from around the Mediterranean had gone to Athens, Antioch, Rhodes, Alexandria and other centres to study with notable philosophers and rhetoricians.

The key differences between medieval Paris and ancient Athens and other centres of learning were, that the students of Paris were in due course assessed and approved (licensed); and that the body of masters (the *universitas*) controlled the assessment and licensing.

These few characteristics have marked universities ever since. They exist to prepare people for learned professions; they consist of a body of people highly qualified in those professions; they examine their students and they certify to their competence. All the other

aspects of later universities - their mental stimulus, their sense of community, their social life, their sporting prowess, fine buildings, libraries, laboratories, beautiful campuses, contribution to national development or export income - are accretions on that central task of professional preparation and certification. Sometimes universities have done their tasks very badly; the eighteenth century English universities were a scandal in their laxity; but it was a laxity in performing those central tasks.

So I suggest to the Review Committee that a university is an association of highly qualified people who prepare others for professional careers, who assess their students and certify to their competence. Whether those things are done by one-to-one tutoring in an Oxford college, lectures to 500 in the Wallace Theatre at Sydney, by print and telephone from Toowoomba to Hong Kong or by internet around the world does not affect that definition of a university. The variations are matters of expediency or preference, they are not central. It is easy to get bogged down in consideration of those peripheral matters.

Distance education

Appendix 11 spends much time discussing distance education, lamenting that Australian universities seldom reach maximal economies of scale, and arguing the merits of the mega-universities - as if "distance education" were a single thing and the megas are its ideal form. In fact distance education has at least three points of origin and three purposes, which affect its forms: those of the British Open University, which provided the model for many imitators, so much so that it is often thought to be the only model; those of the Asian universities with enrolments in the hundreds of thousands; and the Australian version, the so-called "Armidale model".

The British Open University was established to extend educational opportunity at a time when Britain had almost no provision for part-time study (Birkbeck College of the University of London was probably the sole exception) and no general provision for mature-aged students. The almost universal pattern was that one finished school and went to university full time, and there were no second chances for late developers. The OU was an equity measure for that huge pool of potential students, whom the nation could not afford to accommodate in the traditional forms of education. Australia had been providing part-time and mature-aged education for decades and had no need for such a measure as the OU.

The Asian distance universities are not primarily measures of social equity, but are a form of safety valve for unmet demand or of defence for the elite universities. The then Rector of Sukhothai Thammathirat University in Thailand was quite explicit about it at an Asian Development Bank conference I attended in 1985; Sukhothai, with an enrolment then of about 100,000, exists to cater for the masses wanting some form of higher education, and to prevent the pressure of numbers from injuring the elite universities such as Chulalongkorn. "We are here so that Chulalongkorn can get on with its job" were the Rector's words. These mega-universities have huge enrolments and huge wastage rates, and their conferences and discussions are constantly centred on the topic of academic standards - and rightly so. They are not a model anyone would deliberately embrace unless demographic pressures made it unavoidable.

University distance education in Australia began in the second decade of this century at the University of Queensland, which was required by the State Government to provide educational opportunities for schoolteachers in any part of that State. UQ set up a Department of External Studies, separate from the regular academic departments, with its

own staff, syllabuses and examinations. It was, rightly or wrongly, not highly regarded by the academic departments. When the University of New England came into being, with a charter to provide external studies, the university resolved not to go the Queensland route but to provide external students with the same teachers, the same courses and the same examinations as the on-campus students. Thus the degree was unarguably of the same standard. Every Australian university - including Queensland - has followed that model. So has New Zealand, so has Sweden. It is a guarantee of academic standards.

The only way Australian universities could achieve the economies of scale that UKOU or the other mega-universities achieve is by adopting a single course package for each unit, for all universities; for example, there would be one unit of Introductory Accounting or Introduction to Statistics or Sociology 101 for all distance students in the country. But that would either divorce the distance course from the on-campus course in each university (thus breaching that guarantee of standards), or every on-campus course would have to adopt the relevant unit - the tail wagging the dog indeed!

I have spent years of my life trying to move Australian distance providers to seek economies of scale, and I recognise that there is still much to be done. However the cause is not helped by naive advocacy of models which are based on quite different premises and address quite different issues. There are many different kinds of motor car, for different purposes, and one does not try to cross the Simpson Desert in a Mazda 121, nor does one need an expensive off-road vehicle to go to the suburban shopping centre. There are different kinds of distance education for different purposes, and they should be recognised as such.

[\[Return to Top\]](#) [\[Return to Index\]](#)