

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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A POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLARSHIPS FORUM RESPONSE

On 15.6.06 I attended the Sydney University Postgraduate (PG) Research Scholarships Forum. Unfortunately I had to leave soon after the opening address by Masud Behnia, the Dean of Graduate Studies. I was invited, I think by a member of his staff, to make my response in writing if unable to stay, and do so below.

THE WAY FORWARD – EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH TRAINING

The above title is Professor Behnia's. Later discussion occurs in the light of his stated aims for Sydney University research training, as outlined below. (The emphases are his):

To improve higher degree research (HDR) **completion** rates

1. Improve research candidature management and **supervision**
2. Consistent adoption of **best practices** (annual review, thesis examination, etc.) across the university
3. **Integrate** student services, support, administration, etc.

Grow our share of the **pie**

1. **Increase** research student numbers
2. **Increase** research income
3. **Increase** publications (encourage research students to publish)

Effective and efficient allocation of **scholarships**

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT AND SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

The concept of excellence in research training and all related aims outlined above must be understood in a new international market and related communications, research and education context. Google has just announced plans to build multi-billion dollar data centres in the Pacific North-West. The Google mission statement is to 'organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful' (Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) 16.6.06, p.11). Also, Bill Gates, the Chairman of Microsoft and the world's richest person, has announced his plans to step down from day to day work in 2008 and focus his attention on improving global health and access to technology through the Bill and Melinda Gates charitable foundation, which holds \$US 29 billion. Gates started this organization with his wife, a former Microsoft employee, who now manages the foundation assisted by members of the family and many others. The foundation has recently contributed \$US159 million, or half of worldwide funding for research that could result in ten new drugs to help the poorest people fight diseases such as malaria and

tuberculosis (SMH, 17.6.06, p. 17). Patents do not deliver drugs for these kind of people. They tend to serve the rich first and the poor, perhaps never. Markets are not perfect.

General research and my experience suggest that Australian governments support the above directions towards health and education accessibility for all through more openly available information and related development. This is therefore the global and national context and direction within which Sydney University ideally must align its goals for its research and teaching to succeed. To do otherwise is to risk being taken for a comparatively closed and privileged community with its roots in a British feudal past, which continues to be the primary career tool and plaything of the professional and related international elites on one hand, or brave the secretive casinos of the international markets. These unfortunate results may be obtained together, if Sydney University continues to champion its comparatively closed approach to all education content and related information technology systems, accompanied by a secretive, high risk, high cost approach to research commercialisation in which patents and related legal costs drive all.

The Sydney University Business Liaison Office currently appears obsessed with patents as the only legitimate form of commercialisation. The organization seems to have gone backwards since 2002 when Kevin Croft offered a definition of commercialisation as:

‘Maximising the process of transferring outcomes to the community in a manner which optimises the chances of their successful implementation, encourages their use, accelerates their introduction and shares the benefits among the contributing parties’

He offered this to the Medical Foundation and the College of Health Sciences Conference in Leura. It has no contractual or legislative backing but seems good to me. I would like to understand more about how to do this effectively, through close discussion with superannuation managers and all relevant others. (Contact Nixon Apple in the ACTU!)

From the international and related government perspectives outlined above, Sydney University appears to have inherited the worst of worlds in planning for success in future research training. Perhaps the VC, Gavin Brown, also had this in mind when he said, in the Sydney University News (June, 2006, p.2), that the enthronement of King Canute against the tide was said to be predominantly a demonstration to his court that his powers were not supernatural. Was this also his oblique suggestion that the dominant Australian professional and academic cultures cannot continue to rest upon past laurels and related collegiate practices without facing a fight against more powerful players who primarily want universities at last to serve the common good, as distinct from sectional interests? (I like to think so.)

IMPROVING HIGHER DEGREE RESEARCH COMPLETION

RECOMMENDATION 1: CONSOLIDATE ALL AUSTRALIAN SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION FORMS AND RELATED BUREAUCRATIC PROCEDURES TO THE MAXIMUM EXTENT WHICH IS CONSISTENT WITH BEST PRACTICE

If you asked most academics and other members of the community about the worst aspect of seeking funds I think they might say that it is constantly filling in the requirements of government and related application forms, where all are voluminous, but different. The proliferation of multiple systems which give out comparatively small amounts of money according to many minute and varying specifications is often a large and unnecessary waste of money for all involved in public institutions. Australian government and all related collegiate institutions do not so far appear to be the exceptions which may prove this rule.

RECOMMENDATION 2: GET STUDENTS EARLIER AND MORE EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BETTER APPLICATION HANDLING

Some years ago, the Provost declared, on at least two separate health related campuses of the university, that he abhorred all unnecessary handling of forms, and this should stop forthwith. In our bureaucratic and collegiate culture, did he fancy himself as King Canute?

From my perspective the best way to improve higher degree research completion would be first of all to get the students effectively engaged. This could be done by:

- 1. Having a single entry point for handling all applications for PG study in the university**
- 2. Having a weekly university wide email listing all the students who are searching for a supervisor and providing brief details of their project interests, whilst inviting direct responses from academics to the searching students.**

Other appropriate arrangements may be made for supervisor allocation, for some good reason. However, single entry point for handling student applications appears efficient.

I speak as a sociologist in the Faculty of Health Sciences who has generally preferred to teach undergraduate (UG) students to postgraduate (PG) students. From my perspective one needs to get the foundations of anything one wants to advance in properly dug first. I also like to reach hundreds of people and teach them how to apply a sociological approach in simple research at work or in communities with a view to promoting health and governance for sustainable development anywhere. Even after a decade of teaching in the Faculty of Health Sciences I have no idea of the process by which PG students come into the Faculty and are allocated supervisors. However, from this distance, the university wide process appears to be a bureaucratic nightmare which I have so far been glad to have escaped.

On the other hand, whenever my Faculty colleagues send round an email asking if anyone wants to supervise a particular student and project, I always respond, if I am anywhere near the area. Nothing has ever come of this. Sometimes students who are perfect strangers to me suddenly email me direct, asking me what I think of their research proposal. I assume this is because they are checking me out as a potential supervisor. I always respond immediately and enthusiastically to all requests for guidance.

However, on 13.1.06, a medical radiation technology specialist working in a four hundred-bed hospital owned by an oil company in Saudi Arabia approached me with his PHD proposal, which I did not like and could not handle. He then offered another, more to my liking, and we have had a voluminous and extremely interesting correspondence about his project regularly ever since. Last week he asked me how the administrative side of things was going. On pursuit of his file I found he had been allocated to another supervisor, to commence in 2007. I was told I should have claimed him for myself to my collegiate administrative authorities. I had wrongly assumed that he would have to claim me as his, following the discrete questioning of an administrative third party. The latter seems more administratively appropriate to me, as I assume he will be paying the money for what I hope will be our future interaction. Anyway, we love each other and cannot now be parted. (Just kidding?)

GROWING OUR SHARE OF THE PIE

Currently, the typical goals of the private sector, Australian governments and academics all pull in different directions and must be harmonized for best results. Later proposals are made in the light of this assumption and applied to research training. The VC has elsewhere said that he seeks a noble purpose and a better bottom line for the university.

He also said:

“One of the dangers in a developed economy is that universities conceptualise themselves partly as businesses, which of course you must, but you must never lose sight of the core objectives of the university, and absolutely fundamental to that is academic freedom” (AFR 14.1.05, p.29)

Especially in the current global context, academic freedom must also be conceptualised as the duty to seek and fearlessly tell the apparent truth, in the interests of everybody, as distinct from being silent or lying in the interests of commercial or political masters. Papers and recommendations on research and education direction in regard to governance and dispute resolution are attached with this local, national and international context in mind.

RECOMMENDATION 3: ALIGN UNIVERSITY GOALS BETTER WITH THOSE OF GOVERNMENT, BUSINESSES AND RELATED COMMUNITIES AND DEVELOP RESEARCH TRAINING PARTNERSHIPS.

I think the Dean of Graduate Studies and other managers should undertake discussions with key industry, government and community representatives to determine the potential for consensually designed projects which better align the normally divergent aims of commerce, government and academia, with the aim of improving on the normally expected results of all. (From my perspective, discussions might commence with those employers and others who have most vigorously supported or attacked the plans of the Leader of the Opposition to amend WorkChoices legislation if Labor comes to power. Sydney Lord Mayor and Member for Bligh, Clover Moore, most easily springs to mind. (But there are as many ways forward as there are academics. Mine are attached.)

In his talk, Professor Behnia pointed out that the aim at Sydney University is to double PG student intake in five years and that it is expected that most students will come from outside Australia. Sydney University currently takes 15% of its PG students from overseas, while the Australian National University (ANU), which leads other universities in the Group of Eight (Go8) in this, takes 27%. Masud estimated that in the United States around 60% of PG students come from outside the country. A graph he provided showed the biggest growth in Australian research students since 2000 has been to Colleges of Science and Technology, followed by Colleges of Humanities and Social Sciences, with Colleges of Health Sciences running last of the three.

I think the relevant graph was for all Australian universities, but I am not sure, as the source indicated in accompanying information is too small to read. I do not know how economics or law entered into these computations, or why business management was apparently left out. These are important questions for consideration during the current Sydney University management and faculty restructures. This is so because the research and education interests of governments, businesses and all other communities can only be pursued through a properly related understanding of their major economic, governance and administrative problems, which further research and education should also be designed to assist them solve. (We are living in a material world.)

Perhaps the recent and comparatively higher expansion of research teaching in science and technology can be put down to Australian businesses and governments preparing to develop their relations in the global market further. Melbourne University apparently leads the Go8 in research income, research completions and publications. However, higher research degree completions are a problem for Melbourne and Sydney Universities alike. In 2004, for a student load of 2650 there were 724 completions at Melbourne University, compared with a student load of 2645 and 597 completions at Sydney University. Sydney University apparently spends more than other Australian universities on providing its own scholarships to support its students.

Masud pointed out that, if properly invested, a bequest of \$250,000 will provide a continuing student scholarship of \$20,000 per annum. In the light of this it seems useful

for Sydney University to have discussions with industry and government about how to grow the general research, research teaching and related development pie sustainably to benefit the contracting parties and the whole Australian community.

Government, business and communities generally reward contractor completion of special projects, not their commencement and duration. This is a principle which one might logically expect to apply in universities. From this perspective, it seems unjust that the Commonwealth government rewards universities for higher research degree **completions**, and **publications** but rewards them for winning research income (**rather than completing research projects**). This appears to reward speculative rather than productive endeavour, and the related collegiate networks which have a vested interest in this continuing practice and award the funds. The issue is important as 50% of Australian government funded research subsidies to universities are for research degree completions; 40% are for winning research income and 10% are for publications. The current practice seems to doubly reward researchers who have already been lucky enough to be awarded research funds, presumably through NHMRC or ARC collegiate structures to identify supposed 'excellence'. Are those good at winning money also good at all completions? (If not, why not?)

RECOMMENDATION 4: DESIGN ALL UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM CONTENT TO PROMOTE AND SUPPORT RESEARCH TRAINING LATER AND MAKE IT FREELY AVAILABLE TO ALL

The provision of education and the certification of competency are logically separate matters, and Sydney University may do both. In the latter context, students may be viewed primarily as consumers of certificates, who are ideally hoping to gain the most prestigious kind available to them, and maximise their future incomes. Alternatively, economists may view students as products to whom value may be added through all education, to meet the broader community need for skills development, new knowledge and all related work or entertainment. From the collective perspective of employers, government and other communities, the more broadly, effectively and cheaply students can be produced the better, even if most seem fated never to become great minds or practitioners. Education only for the 'thick rich', is worst of all. (This can happen.)

I assume that industry and government primarily fund research and related training activity because they want to solve their development problems. If so, it seems likely they would care little about how many students go to universities or how good they are on any index developed solely by universities. On the other hand, Sydney University and others seem currently to value students and staff according to their own criteria, without investigating the utility of their outcomes from broader community perspectives.

However, the Group of 8 Universities Response to the Expert Advisory Group's Preferred Model paper for the Research Quality Framework (RQF 2005) has identified the need for a clear statement of research purpose in relation to application of the RQF. The first two points of the Group of 8 proposed purpose for the RQF were:

1. To provide governments and business with the additional information they need to assess the value of their investments in research
2. To provide researchers and institutions with the additional information they need to plan future research strategies.

Students and potential students, as well as all the above stakeholders would benefit from the provision of freely available UG education content. This provides the baseline information upon which training for research should normally be expected to develop.

From the perspective of the economist, the customer and the public, a perfect customer service culture has perfect information which is perfectly accessible. If one takes that seriously, I think Sydney University must open everything up to scrutiny, starting with education content. If one is a customer, getting close to perfect information and education depend on getting what one most appears to need and/or want, as rapidly and cheaply as possible, whether or not one pays for it oneself. There are barriers to this.

The typical university approach to growing the student pie begins by putting the cart before the horse in undergraduate (UG) education. This happens when UG students are asked how they rate their subjects and teachers, with comparative disregard by university management for what those outside academia may think of the quality of the content which they are taught. Do major employers, government and related communities see it as relevant for their further economic and creative development or good governance?

It is always good for academics to find out how UG students judge their subjects and teachers when they are questioned, just before exams. However, to judge teachers and prepare UG students for later research training and activity effectively, the basic tertiary education content must be available to all, so they may judge whether it appears useful to meet their particular research and related training needs. Since the quality of education can only depend partly on whether its content meets the diverse needs and capacities of subjective individuals, the open presentation and continuing discussion of this content is the foundation on which all related training should be built.

RECOMMENDATION 5: REMOVE BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE RESEARCH TRAINING PARTICIPATION AND REJECT ALL DYSFUNCTIONAL RESEARCH AND EDUCATION LIMITATIONS BASED PRIMARILY ON PURSUIT OF VESTED ACADEMIC OR RELATED INDUSTRIAL INTERESTS

Recommendation 18 (p.11) of the recent Review of Basic Sciences in the Faculty of Health Sciences praised customer service culture. I think that people who are used to collegiate culture often have major vested interests in being incapable of genuinely recognizing a customer service culture. For example, it seems that those who wrote the Review do not even recognize health care as being in an industry. Page 16 says about the Bachelor of Health Sciences (BHS):

‘The BHS is designed to give its graduates the opportunity to become involved in contemporary healthcare by linking the three arms of healthcare – practitioners, the healthcare system and industry – in a unique manner.’

As I wrote to the review, I teach in the BHS and have no idea what the above is supposed to mean and why the BHS is considered unique. I do not see practitioners, the healthcare system and industry as the three arms of healthcare. From my perspective, this statement is nonsense because practitioners and the healthcare system are both in the health and community services industry. I think people on the Cumberland campus should ask statisticians about ABS definitions and try and work with them. How can people who do not appear to accept or understand the concept of health care as an industry talk seriously about implementing a customer service culture?

I teach sociology, health policy and risk management at work in the Faculty of Health Sciences. All UG students are required to undertake Introduction to Health Sociology, (or a similar, new subject entitled Environments, Health and Society) before they can choose to do additional sociology options, some of which may also be more vocationally oriented and applied. Experience of teaching on these compulsory, introductory subjects suggests that students do not like them like I do. Far from being necessary pre-requisites for further sociological understanding, I now think these subjects introduce an extremely complex range of overarching sociological concepts before students comprehend the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the health care system, the workplace and related communities which interest them. Instead, they are introduced, through sociology, to almost everything in the world, all at once. While this may be most logical from the sociologist’s perspective, is it necessary or desirable? I think many health students forced to try to gain a sociological imagination may feel they already have more than enough of it on their first encounter with the world and all its workings. (I am bound to view this as a pity.)

Many health students may feel more comfortable if taken into the deep end of anything gradually, on their own terms, and on those of their community. A fortunate few, like myself, may be thrilled by simply leaping into a particular discipline from the deep end. I therefore think the current compulsory arrangements demonstrate a misplaced concern by sociologists with maintaining purity of discipline. I think this concern is to the detriment of future student and community interests and outcomes because students may currently never go on and choose to gain the benefits of an applied sociological approach at work and in all related service, and in which they appear to be more interested. Personally, I think that divorce (especially early divorce) from the practical health student world nearly always harms the disciplines, and in my opinion sociology is no exception. Student polling may show similar problems of introduction in other areas of UG teaching.

Further up their ladders, many PG students entering the Faculty of Health Sciences also face compulsory subject matter which, until very recently, was entitled Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods. Were I a potential PG student I would personally rather remain outside this institution than begin my research training with this subject which teaches information I am not competent or interested in, or which I think is wrong and

probably immoral. (I have made submissions about the problems of the dominant research perspectives on this campus to many recent reviews.)

In regard to research and related training in health at Sydney University, I have also tried to read Nutbeam and Harris's book 'Theory in a Nutshell' many times but have enormous trouble focusing on it. It makes little structural or cumulative sense to me, in spite of some headings and linking passages which suggest it should. I find myself asking why any particular methodology is being described, rather than any other, in any particular section. Also, what is the difference between a theory and a methodology? To me this book mainly seems to be describing methodologies, some of which are also related to behaviour prediction. What exactly is the point of these from any broader community perspectives? Do we ideally want to predict behaviour or to change it?

I assume that a theory is defined as a hypothesis, and that one can have a hypothesis about anything and devise a related methodology. Nutbeam and Harris, on the other hand, say that a theory is:

'Systematically organized knowledge applicable in a relatively wide variety of circumstances devised to analyse, predict or otherwise explain the nature of behaviour of a specified set of phenomena that could be used as the basis for action'.

I believe that this primarily defines a methodology which aims to be repeated, not a theory. From my perspective, their definition of theory is an example of the ideological reification of various possible approaches to understanding and tackling social issues in order to address them better (social sciences?). This reification often occurs when groups of academics with vested status and economic interests establish empires of influence which information technology systems may then cement and multiply. The power of such people has grown massively, expensively, and often wrongly, from my perspective. (Please see attached letter to Microsoft.)

A theory, from my social sciences perspective, is a hypothesis about what particular action will provide the answer to a particular social problem. As a materialist, postmodernism is just a market driven, academic ideology to me. However, I think this book is perhaps a perfect example of its product. Ideology, after all, is always supported and driven by a material base.

Thank you for this opportunity to make a submission with a view to improving the management of the university in the public interest. (I always find it therapeutic work.)

Yours truly

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