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| **Traditional Universities Are Past Their Use-By Date** |

**Introduction**

Every new government enquiry into higher education seems to begin with hand-wringing about the persistence of inequalities in access to education, to which our universities respond that the solution is to give them more money. There’s rarely much talk about the need for reform of universities’ inefficient (and unfair) work practices, over-investment in infrastructure or wasteful teaching methods. Yet reform in these areas could drive down the cost of a university qualification and enable governments to spend more on the underlying causes of inequality.

In her introduction to one such enquiry in the United States way back in 2006, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings wrote:

*“What we have learned over the last year makes clear that American higher education has become what, in the business world, would be called a mature enterprise: increasingly risk-averse, at times self-satisfied, and unduly expensive. It is an enterprise that has yet to address the fundamental issues of how academic programs and institutions must be transformed to serve the changing educational needs of a knowledge economy….History is littered with examples of industries that, at their peril, failed to respond – or even to notice – changes in the world around them, from railroads to steel manufacturers. Without serious self-examination and reform, institutions of higher education risk falling into the same trap, seeing their market share substantially reduced and their services increasingly characterized by obsolescence”* (p.xii).

Nearly two decades on and very little has changed either in the United States or anywhere else for that matter. International ranking tables derived from scores on a narrowly focused set of variables continue to push universities in one direction and stifle innovation. In an international marketplace, universities must perform well in the rankings game and to do that they need to conform to a singular archetype. In Australia’s case where universities derive the lion’s share of their revenue from student fees, the emphasis on research in ranking schemes means that they have no choice but to divert significant sums of money away from students and into research. This is because successive federal governments have declined to fund the full cost of research, so universities have turned to international students to meet the shortfall. The result is that Australia now has some of the largest universities in the world serving among the least satisfied students. Meanwhile, the digital world forges ahead at breathtaking speed presenting teaching institutions with challenges that were unimaginable months, let alone years ago. Because our universities have resisted reform for so long, the task ahead of them now is daunting indeed.

It’s a brave person who would claim to have a blueprint for reform of higher education but some broad directions warrant consideration.

FIRST, what about phasing out the mega campus in favour of a scaled down hub and spoke configuration comprised of geographically dispersed, multi-purpose hubs where students can meet together and where academic support is available onsite? Mega campuses are hugely expensive to build, depreciate and maintain and are empty for much of the year anyway. Why build such white elephants in the first place? Would we construct hospitals that operate like that? To the extent that students need to meet and talk about their work (the importance of which is grossly exaggerated by universities), this can be achieved in low cost shared facilities such as internet cafes, corporate meeting rooms, public libraries or in any number of publicly owned buildings. Universities might object that they already operate hub and spoke operations since most of them run smaller branch campuses. But not only are these branch campuses single purpose facilities that are themselves under-utilized, but they are also do nothing to scale down the mega campuses that spawn them; they are additional to rather than substitutes for mega campuses.

SECOND, what about embracing recent advances in information technology such as Microsoft’s *Azure AI* combination of AI and digital holography to replicate the on-campus experience anytime anywhere[[1]](#footnote-1)? There is no longer any reason to force students to assemble in one place at one time in order to learn. A former colleague of mine teaches a class of some three-hundred-and-fifty students but as the semester proceeds, class attendance shrinks to around ten percent of that number. This is a common experience in Australian universities unless they introduce draconian measures to compel students to turn up. But why should students have to attend when all of the information they require to pass their exams is available for download from the university’s learning management system and elsewhere on the internet? If the on-campus experience is so valuable, why do so many students not show up? Young people entering tertiary education today have grown up with smartphones, iPads, smartboards and other digital devices. Their knowledge of the world is shaped by Google and Twitter, and they interact with people and information unceasingly on Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook. Surveys from the United States report that around half of all teenagers in that country are *never* not online. They send and receive information all day, every day. They learn things, trivial things and earth-shattering things, as they are actually happening. Why go to class when you can acquire the same information faster by watching a YouTube video or playing a computer game? Why memorise facts for a test when you have all the information you need in the palm of your hand? Past methods make little sense to today’s students; nor do they make much sense in the modern workplace where the capacity to locate and use information is more valuable than knowing things.

Not only is there infinitely more information available in cyberspace, but that information is customizable to individual students, so that the one class of students can arrive at the same destination via very different routes depending on their academic background, skills and interests. Moreover, the enormous appeal of Wikipedia demonstrates the need for education to move beyond the *transmission* of knowledge to incorporate its *creation* and *re*-creationby students themselves. In today’s culture, students expect to be part of the educational process not merely consumers of it. This is unfamiliar territory for academics of my generation who were raised on the idea that only professionals create knowledge. But Facebook, Wikipedia and blogging have radically undermined this assumption because all consist of information that is created by, not just communicated to participants. The acts of teaching and learning have become blurred as a consequence. Developments such as *Azure AI* also mean that it’s time to drop the distinction between face-to-face and online communication. This generation of young people has all but given up on the distinction already. When young people text one another or post on Facebook, they don’t think to themselves, “Now I’m leaving the real world and going into the virtual world”. To young people it’s all one – they meet, they tweet, they stream video, they post on Facebook, and they share the most intimate details about themselves with friends, some of whom they may have never even met.

THIRD, what about putting an end to the wasteful duplication of courses? Why is it necessary for every university in the country to run all courses in-house? The material in, say, first year mathematics is essentially the same in every university, yet rarely if ever do universities share courses. Surely it would be more cost-effective for universities to specialise in different aspects of the curriculum and share courses or even sections of courses across institutions rather than replicate them all within every university. Duplication like this may have been necessary in the days where the distribution of courseware required that students assemble at the source of production but now that the distribution problem has been solved by the internet, it is possible for universities to collaborate across institutions and for students to learn from the best and brightest anywhere in world.

FOURTH, what about increasing the incentive for quality teaching by creating a closer nexus between an academic’s salary and the number of students they actually teach? Since the EFTSL (equivalent full-time student load) is a unit of currency, why is there currently *no* association between the revenue an academic brings into the university and the salary they receive? Naturally any move towards reflecting student load in academic salary packages would need to be handled sensibly and not be crudely formulaic but under existing industrial arrangements senior academic staff have shifted the burden of teaching onto a low paid and casualised workforce because there is no disincentive to do so. The end result is that universities now support a generation of financially unproductive workers.

In his research into higher education, Harvard professor Clayton Christensen observed that disruptive innovations like those proposed here rarely come out of established enterprises. Even when a truly new way of doing things occurs to someone in a traditional organization, established systems and standards take over and the idea is quashed. A new idea that isn’t dismissed entirely is almost inevitably modified to fit the way things are traditionally done, losing its innovation impact in the process. In the case of higher education, radical reform is especially difficult because next generation private providers have been required to conform to a regulatory framework that shoe-horns them into the traditional way of doing things. As the most powerful players in the industry, traditional universities have succeeded in convincing governments to instal them as the gatekeepers to participation in the industry and, not surprisingly, they have crafted the regulatory framework in their own image and likeness. The *Higher Education Standards Framework* (HES) must surely be the most over-engineered regulatory framework ever conceived in this country. It is replete with tightly prescribed obligations that are purposefully designed to repress dissent.

I do not mean to suggest that universities are motivated solely by self-interest. Higher education is a critical export industry and the student market is obsessed with rankings and unsubstantiated assumptions about what constitutes quality. The nation tampers with these things at its peril. Nevertheless, we will continue to stagnate if we surrender entirely to the preferences of our existing markets. To paraphrase Henry Ford, if he’d listened only to his customers, he’d have built a better horse.

While some of the reforms advocated here can be accomplished by traditional universities within Australia’s existing regulatory framework, we alsorequire policies that promote experimentation outside of the framework. The challenge before us is not unlike the transition to renewable energy. For government, the question is how to facilitate new approaches without destroying the traditional product on which the industry was built. This is a problem in change management and, as with energy, it can not be achieved overnight. We should continue to impose the *Australian Qualifications Framework* and a less prescriptive form of the *Higher Education Standards Framework* (HESF) on traditional university qualifications while simultaneously encouraging new forms of teaching and new forms of credential outside of those frameworks. Ideally, the new educational forms should be recognised and co-sponsored by industry to serve their particular workforce needs. There is a growing number of such models around the world, such as U.S. State of Louisiana’s *Industry-Based Certification* (IBC), which is an independent third party credential that is accepted by industry and results from some form of assessment where an individual's knowledge and skill in a particular area is verified against a set of pre-determined standards, much like vocational education in Australia, except that the application of IBCs is broader and much less prescriptive than VET qualifications. What matters for IBCs is not *how* a student acquires a skill but *whether* the skill is acquired. In contrast to the crushing uniformity imposed by vocational education, such an approach would enable new providers to experiment with new forms of teaching and their efficacy would be decided by external assessment both during and at the conclusion of a course.

The nation will not solve the problem of unequal access by throwing more money at traditional universities. Universities are too expensive, inefficient and resistant to change. The internet has changed the way people learn and solved the distribution problem that gave us the anachronistic mega campus. It is high time to move on.

**Jim Barber**

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1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auJJrHgG9Mc> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)