

WHAT SHOULD UNIVERSITIES BE?

USAP Symposium 21-23 November 2018, University of Sydney

SUMMARY REPORT (18.12.18)

The University of Sydney Association of Professors (USAP) invited a broad group of professors and managers from Australian Universities, with representatives from government and media, to consider the current and future opportunities and challenges in higher education generally and for Universities in particular. The response was distilled into a program with sixteen speakers and two panels, one at the end of each of the two days. As expected, we received a diversity of views. We present these individually in the report below, rather than attempt an anodyne average that would lose power!

In addition, a proposal was presented for the formation of an Australian Association of University Professors (AAUP), to form a voice for professorial members in working with business and government, while not overlapping with the University Peak Bodies and lobby groups

In this report we present a brief summary drawn from the abstracts and the presentations of many of the speakers and from the two panels. These are listed below in the order they were presented.

Please go to the USAP WEBSITE (sydney.edu.au/usap) for the program, the bios of the speakers, and the full papers or extended abstracts where available. There is a great deal of thought in these papers.

+++++

OVERALL PROGRAM

DAY 1, Session 1. – Acknowledgment to Country

Opening address: Professor STEPHEN GARTON, Provost University of Sydney

The emergence of mass education systems in the postwar era has raised fundamental questions about the purpose, governance and mission of individual institutions and of institutional systems. Economists have largely ignored the role of universities, for example in the creation of millions of new jobs that fuel invention, innovation, employment and the service sector. Universities can play a central role in national and international policy teamwork when government and business engage. The expansion has raised new opportunities and challenges, for example in collegial governance in the requirements for academic and corporate rigour, and the many complex calls on resources over a period of reducing public funding and support. [Visit Website for full paper]

Keynote Lecture: Who or what leads a university in 2018? Professor SIR ERIC THOMAS, Vice Chancellor (to 2016) University of Bristol, UK

No university is an island. Universities are impacted by many external variables over which they may have limited control yet they can greatly affect the institution. Universities are also shaped by the style of their leadership. This presentation will discuss the effects of some important external variables and explore the strength of collegial leadership. This will set the background for further presentations and potential recommendations [Visit website for full paper].

The Dilemmas (and Delights?) of the Modern University. Professor MARIAN BAIRD AO, University of Sydney

Education exports are now \$31.9 Bn/yr and have increased 14% in 2018, making brains almost equivalent to minerals and coal as Australia's top earning sectors. The massification of tertiary education, and the expansion of international student numbers, bring two-way benefits and challenges. The overall proportion of international students at 26%, being over 50% of students in business schools, can cause cultural advantage and some practical disadvantage, but has proven to be the economic cash cow in development of Australian universities into corporate giants, with complex layers and requirements in managerial and real estate. Few academics want to be managers, and women want jobs that are secure and have workplace respect – whereas many are in casual jobs that preclude careers.

Australian Universities and the Politics of Time Management. PAUL GILES, Professor of English, University of Sydney

Academic time-scales are not readily commensurable with political time-scales. Profoundly influential projects may take years or decades to bring to maturity. This has always been difficult to manage in an Australian context, where academia, like the judiciary, has found itself under pressure from exigent forms of democracy that have generally not been sympathetic to alternative public spheres. With reference to particular precedents, I argue that universities need to be more responsible in the allocation of research time, just as government agencies need to understand that scholarly time cannot properly be directed according to conventional bureaucratic measures.

+++++

DAY 1, Session 2

Global and Local: what should a top international university be? JOHN HEARN, Professor of Physiology, School of Medical Sciences

The balance between local and global in research and teaching, thinking and engagement, is critical in addressing global challenges. Among the leading 200 world universities, a variety of instruments are used to build teamwork and nurture minds. Global policy frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, Climate Accords, and the China Belt and Road Initiative provide opportunities. There are countercurrents that deviate from OECD guidelines. Poor leadership, managerialism and

bureaucratic bullying have reduced academic quality, increased costs and wasted time. Universities must return to basics, simplify, and reform for the future.

The Politics of Higher Education. Professor JOHN HEWSON AM, The Australian National University.

As politics becomes increasingly short term, opportunistic, populous and mostly negative “game”, focused on point scoring and blame shifting, higher education has become something of a political football, especially as government positions fluctuate. Universities may gain advantage in a “2030 plan, setting ambitious targets and the pathways to achieve them. There is an urgent need to depoliticize higher education, perhaps by establishing an independent Higher Education Commission that takes key issues out of day to day politics. The advance of technologies, and the new options for teaching and communications, raises questions about the overbuilding of universities. The majority of Australian Universities are “State” owned, but see little return of state payroll and other taxes paid. [Visit website for expanded abstract]

Irreproducibility: nothing is more certain

Professor SALLY CRIPPS, Brain and Mind Centre, University of Sydney

Strategies for survival as an academic researcher become ever more necessary. The opportunities through interdisciplinary research are enormous, for example in predicting complex systems related to weather, drought or floods. The pressures to attract sustainable funding are heavy. To cut through to success, it is necessary to choose a small number of challenges and fundamentally important questions that will deliver impact. It is important to start small and stay focused. Choosing collaborators is an art, in building teams and mutual respect. Deciding when to finish collaborations can be important. Strong, enthusiastic and supportive leadership is essential.

The biggest bang for the buck: how to optimize research productivity. Professor HANS PETER DIETZ, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, University of Sydney

Productivity is central to most human endeavour, and that’s also true for our core business of research. We as a University need to stay competitive. Productivity is the key and more important than ever due to increasing global competition. Unfortunately, our means of measuring productivity are very limited, and in some instances downright unsuitable. I’ll summarize the outcome measures in current use and focus on their limitations. To start measuring productivity is an urgent, crucial matter because productivity is being impacted by multiple factors outside our control. I’ll examine what can be done to mitigate some of those factors.

What Makes a Good University? Professor RAEWYN CONNELL, University of Sydney, and Life Member, National Tertiary Education Union.

It’s helpful to consider what makes a university possible in the first place: an allocation of social resources and social authority, carrying with them an obligation for social justice. This contrasts with the current semi-official definition of quality – in the rating scales and league tables – that treats universities

as competing firms run by profit-maximizing managers, whether they are legally ‘public’ or ‘private’. What should universities be? As institutions, they should be industrial democracies. As employers, they should create the conditions for a sustainable workforce. As educators, they should teach from direct knowledge of the students. As research centres, they should embody a fundamental commitment to truthfulness and enable widest participation in the making and circulation of knowledge. Out-of-control growth of managerial control of university operations, enabled by toxic government policymaking and self-seeking corporate interests is the wrong path. My main recommendation for reform: Make all senior management positions and all university council positions elective.

+++++

PUBLIC DEBATE: In association with SYDNEY IDEAS. Chaired by Professor Don Nutbeam, U of Sydney

Panelists: Sir Eric Thomas (BRISTOL), Professor Adrian Piccoli (UNSW), Professor Sinthia Bosnic-Anticevich, Raj Logaraj (Raffles Partners)

The debate commenced with the question “What should students expect?” The debate and answers reinforced that students are at the heart of university objectives and should have inspired teaching, be valued and respected partners, form a high level academic and social peer group, and enjoy excellent facilities, supervision and support. Universities are national assets and should contribute to the international reputation of the country, and also align with innovation and economic development. Students and staff should work in preparing minds to address as yet unpredicted challenges.

NOTE: *The proceedings of this debate were recorded by SYDNEY IDEAS and may be found at Sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/Sydney-ideas/2018/what-should-universities-be.html*

+++++

DAY 2, SESSION 3

How can universities best prepare students for the future of work? Professor PETER SHERGOLD, Chancellor Western Sydney University.

The scale, speed and impact of workplace change is hotly contested. What is clear, however, is that cognitive technologies and machine learning will give rise to robotic process automation of many skilled administrative and professional tasks. The demand for traditional competencies will be eroded and new occupational demands (technology-driven or human-centred) will emerge. There is a natural inclination, in the absence of clear foresight, to keep educating students for the jobs of 2019 – a tendency exacerbated by the increasing influence of professional associations and their registration processes on university curricula. In the facet of transformative change, how can universities best respond? How can we best prepare students for the uncertainties of professional employment, community engagement and democratic citizenship?

Aligning institutional incentives with good social outcomes. ROSS GITTINS, Economics Editor, The Sydney Morning Herald

For thirty years, successive federal government have worked to get university funding off the federal budget. This has amounted to an undeclared, unplanned, backdoor privatisation of universities, which has left them preoccupied with the search for funding, uncertain about their modus operandi, facing conflicting and perverse incentives and tempted to mistreat staff and students in the way a commercial corporation might.

The federal government should reconsider its so far undeclared motives, examine the undesirable consequences of its actions to date and provide universities with funding regime that relieves the financial pressure on them and restores a better balance between their twin roles of teaching and research [See website for expanded abstract]

The changing nature of the academic role. Professor PAULINE ROSS, Professor of Biology, University of Sydney.

In 2000, broadly, Academics were happy and had grants for excellent work, support assistants and students. Students came to lectures. In 2020 academics are struggling to teach, students don't come, research funding is very scarce and quality research students also hard to find. There is more and more demand for administration by academics, even though the ranks of administrators have tripled! Between 2008-18 there has been a 300% increase in teaching only positions, often casual, and almost no increase in teaching and research or research only jobs. The balanced research and teaching academic is becoming extinct.

Why Is the Market for Degrees Different to the Market for Apples? Asymmetric Information and Higher Education. Professor TONY ASPROMOURGOS, School of Economics, University of Sydney

Dissent with respect to the rise of the managerialist university, understood as a shift towards supposed corporate forms of governance, and associated with greater competition between universities—has commonly appealed to the notion of the university as a special kind of corporate entity that at least partly transcends merely economic considerations. We argue that a purely economic analysis of the university provides a sufficient basis for repudiating the managerialist model. Useful possible reforms include strict term limits on tenure of the holders of substantial executive power within universities, and restoration of departmental, school, faculty etc. boards of academics for the ratification of university policies.

**Diversity and inclusion: why is it essential for excellence in higher education?
Professor RENAE RYAN, Professor of Biochemical Pharmacology, University of Sydney.**

There is a long standing challenge in fostering the engagement of women in STEM subjects, but diversity and inclusion are essential for excellence in higher education. Diverse teams are more effective and deliver better results. Inclusion of gender and geographic dimensions builds a more effective base and

greater capacity to perform. The candidates are there to engage in higher education, but the pathways seem few and far between.

**Images and Representations of the University: from Cardinal Newman to Ernst and Young.
Professor JOSEPH G DAVIS, Professor of Information Systems and Services, University of Sydney.**

This presentation will explore the ideal of the modern university starting with Cardinal Newman's vision of the University as the citadel of classical liberal education to the present moment characterised by the ongoing neoliberal transformation. I will discuss a range of representations including the Humboldtian German University model and its refinement and rebirth as the American research university and graduate school. The rise of the contemporary neoliberal university against the backdrop of massively expanded aspirations for higher education, greater involvement of the corporate sector, tendency towards commodification of knowledge, shrinking state support, and technology-driven skills and competencies and the tensions and contradictions it engenders will be reviewed.

**Clark Kerr and Higher Education in 20th century America
MAX BENNETT, School of Medical Sciences (Physiology) University of Sydney**

Clark Kerr, President of the University of California (UC; 1958-1967) was responsible for implementing the most complete plan for higher education anywhere in the world, namely the 'Master Plan for Higher Education in California'. The OECD recommended that all member states follow this Plan, which many did. Kerr had to contend with a number of issues in order to implement the Plan of which the following might be of interest: the sources of funding that allowed implementation; the centrality of departments/disciplines; decentralization of administration; attempts to introduce interdisciplinary schools; the use and abuse of rankings; and finally, the impact of socio-economic factors.

PANEL DISCUSSION ON OUTCOMES OF THE CONFERENCE. Chair Prof JOSEPH SUNG, President Chinese University of Hong Kong (to 1 January 2018)

The closing panelists included ROSS GITTINS, Economics Editor SMS; Professor TAILOI CHAN LING, Physiology; and Professor CHRIS MURPHY, Head School of Medical Sciences and Member of Senate.

The discussions brought out important points including (i) Rankings are flawed but parents look at them (as do Vice Chancellors – and many universities “game” the rankings); (ii) publish or perish strategies are flawed, for example the recent Nobel Prize winner in anti-cancer immunology, James Allison, published few papers; young early career researchers are despondent and doubting research careers; (iii) politicians follow, not lead – academics must speak with a unified voice; (iv) department and disciplines are the engine of university discovery and learning, and are being neutralized by bureaucrats; (iv) an independent higher education commission might help, but had been used previously and closed; (v) political intervention in the academic peer review process is a serious assault on academic freedom.

FOLLOW UP. The Council of USAP will learn from the symposium and consider future options, consulting with Professors and stakeholders across Australia in determining any joint actions.



USAP WEBSITE: Sydney.edu.au/usap

1. Symposium – Final Program
2. Bios of speakers
3. Expanded abstracts and full papers
4. Power point presentations
5. Selected Reference Papers