The Emergence of the New Generation University

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Abstract

This paper describes "New Generation" universities and the challenges they face in fulfilling expectations of them—as catalysts for regional development, providing pathways to higher education for students of diverse backgrounds, developing innovative and applied research which addresses contemporary social and economic issues, and being at the forefront of education across a spectrum of emerging professions. The deteriorating financial position and growing competitiveness of the Australian higher education sector are serious challenges for the nation's economic and regional viability. The answer to this situation can be found in new forms of recognition and in incentive systems that do not only formulaically accept the historical status and positional capital of long established universities, but also recognize the achievements and immense potential of newer institutions—the New Generation Universities.

It has been said that universities have become "a particular kind of public corporation, autonomous but accountable, state-funded yet fee-charging, open to all yet selective, enjoying special privileges but expected to fulfill a range of functions for the public good."[1] In Australia this hybrid creature is a relatively recent creation—less than 20 years old. In this context, opinions on the university of the early twenty-first century diverge widely, and the public expressions of these divergent perspectives are amplified by the interests of their proponents. From the vantage point of the Australian federal government as the funding agency, universities have become more responsive to the international and domestic markets, more efficient by virtue of the decline in public funding, more competitive in their research and teaching endeavours, and more commercially adept (or at least focused).

This is *good* because, implicitly at least, it acknowledges the limits to government support, the private advantages accruing to graduates of higher education, the virtues of competition, and the corporatising of the management, governance and entrepreneurial activity of the university. From another viewpoint, that of an expert analyst of the sector, Simon Marginson, and of the universities themselves, the steady fall in the proportion of the GDP flowing to universities in Australia since the mid-1970s (arrested only briefly in the early 1990s) has seen:

[1] Marginson, S. and McIntyre, S., 2000, "The University and its Public," in *Why Universities Matter*, ed T. Coady, Allen and Unwin, p.53.

- a dramatic worsening of staffing for teaching and research, with implications for both capacity and the conditions underlying quality;
- falling domestic enrolments despite continuing growth of international enrolments;
- a lop-sided developmental framework in which priority goes to a narrow band of marketable courses generating an equally narrow range of private goods, at the expense of teaching and research capacity and quality across all disciplines;
- priority given to short-term revenues over the long-term capacity to produce public and private goods;
- an overall level of public investment in higher education, and rate of growth of domestic participation, increasingly uncompetitive in world terms.[2]

All this is *not* good, because it has undermined the charter of Australian universities as institutions and agents of national development and prosperity, and flies in the face of the concept of government responsibility for, and investment in, economic and social renewal through the education of future generations.

In this paper we will focus on the emerging roles of New Generation Universities and the challenges they face in fulfilling the expectations placed upon them—acting as catalysts for regional development, providing pathways to higher education for students of diverse backgrounds, developing innovative and applied research which addresses contemporary social and economic issues, and being at the forefront of education across a spectrum of emerging professions. The deteriorating financial position and therefore competitiveness of the Australian higher education sector are widely accepted as serious challenges for the nation's economic and regional viability. The answer to this situation can be found in new forms of recognition and in incentive systems that do not just formulaically accept the historical status and positional capital of long established universities, but also recognise the achievements and immense potential of newer institutions—the New Generation Universities.

An Australian Retrospective

The years between 1987 and 1991 saw a transformation in the higher education sector in Australia that was unprecedented in its reach and impact. In 1987 there were 19 universities and 51 colleges of advanced education (including the institutes of technology) nationally. By 1991 there were 38 universities in the new Unified National System, and the number of students in universities had more than doubled. In 1985 the total funded student load in universities nationally was 138,600. By 1991 this had

[2] Marginson, S. 2001, Submission to Senate Committee Inquiry into "The capacity of public universities to meet Australia's higher education needs," Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Reference Committee, p.11 paragraph 28, submission No 81.

increased to a total load of 350,520[3] as both colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology joined the ranks of universities, the majority merging with each other or with established universities. The decade 1985 to 1995 also saw participation in higher education among the 20 to 24 year old population increase from 109 to 172 per thousand, excluding overseas students.[4] The democratisation of higher education envisaged by government through the reforms that resulted in the Unified National System was reflected in shifts in participation by students of all ages.

The development of the higher education sector in Australia is sometimes portrayed as the beginning of the new institutions' foray into research and postgraduate education. In fact, although these new institutions had been state regulated and funded and therefore unable to access the federal research infrastructure funds which flowed to universities, many of their staff were active and successful researchers. Most were, by 1991, already teaching across a spectrum of undergraduate and postgraduate academic awards. With the colleges' entry to the research and postgraduate sector came a suite of professions and emerging disciplines, many of which had already embraced the hallmarks of academic endeavour—critical enquiry, educational breadth, and the generation of knowledge and theory. They continued to battle a perception that they were impostors in the sector—vocations in professional clothing—rather as engineering, law, veterinary science and medicine had done less than a century before.

Many of these new universities were in the emerging outer metropolitan regions of capital cities, in rural centers, or, in the case of most of the now universities of technology, downtown. Collectively, they constituted a New Generation of universities, which despite—or perhaps because of—their youth have since redrawn the boundaries of the higher education sector and forged distinctive identities. All would agree they share a common cause of working at the frontier of educational innovation, enfranchisement, and multidisciplinary enquiry.

The Federal Government's 1988 White Paper articulated a framework for major sectoral and structural change. More than this, however, it presaged the first steps in changing the nature and character of universities that would gather momentum and greater clarity as the decade progressed and give life to a New Generation of universities. The paper proposed that "the Commonwealth will identify national goals and priorities for the higher education system, and ensure that system-wide resources are allocated effectively in accordance with those priorities."[5]

David Phillips has commented that "the practical expression of this policy stance was the unified national system (UNS), which at its most basic level, was a mechanism to restrict the distribution of public resources to a specified group of large institutions."[6]

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[3] DETYA, 1993, *National Report on Australia's Higher Education Sector*, AGPS, pp. 15, 91.

[4] DETYA, 1997, *Higher Education Participation Rates*, AGPS, p. 2.

[5] Dawkins, Hon. J., 1998, *Higher Education: a policy statement*, AGPS p. 10.

[6] Phillips, D, "Competition, Contestability and Market Forces" in *Australia's Future Universities*, ed. J.Sharman and G. Harman, UNE Press, 1997.

There were specifications about minimum institutional size, conscious attempts to limit duplication of expensive infrastructure, gestures towards realising some economies of scale, and increased emphasis on coordination and planning. In this development phase a plethora of degrees in new areas was created. Disciplines and professions such as the allied health sciences, teacher education, business studies, communication and media, and environmental studies were brought into the university sector by the new members of the system.

In the years since a steady decrease in the investment of government in higher education, and the converse increase in contributions from students, have caused unprecedented pressures on institutions. They have, however, also fuelled the drive to innovate, be competitive, and to produce educational products and research that are contemporary, relevant, and demonstrably of high quality, at least as measured by a series of government-designed quality audits and peer judgments.

Viewed in retrospect, the last decade of change in higher education in Australia has been based on an array of shifting policies, contested ideologies, competing priorities, and moveable strategies. This period has served to embed the inherent advantages for the older institutions and impel newer universities to reinvent themselves in order to develop and grow, be competitive, or simply to survive. Responding to the twin realities of globalisation and diminishing public funding, the newer universities are working to identify and build on their strengths and to reorganise in ways that foster financial viability, educational relevance, and competitive advantage.

A central imperative for the latter-day university in this context has been to maintain and enhance two fundamental but not always complementary relationships: those with government and those with the diverse communities, professions, and industries that universities serve. New universities are not able to call on the unencumbered financial reserves and benefactions or years of policy influence of established institutions, and so their relationships to and influence on government and policy are often unclear or evolving. This then presents some key challenges for the resourcefulness, identity, distinctiveness, and viability of the relative newcomers and to the aspirations that their local communities hold for them.

The New Generation University

With these challenges in mind, 35 university leaders from nine countries met last year in Australia to explore their common experiences and aspirations, and the challenges and concerns of institutions formed since 1970 (for the universities from countries where "established" is measured in centuries), although almost all leaders represented institutions created in the 1980s and 1990s. The meeting was co-sponsored by the University of Western Sydney, the OECD, and the Association of Commonwealth Universities. From this meeting emerged the Australian Network of New Generation Universities, with affiliates in Ireland, New Zealand, and Canada.

Resourcing and Influence

Almost all of the universities represented at the Conference had experiences of diminishing public investment in higher education just as they were beginning to build their profiles. In 1997, after the Federal Government budget cuts, the then Vice-Chancellor of Flinders University[7] in South Australia took the view that "the post-budget cuts have been rationalised in all manner of ways and by various people; but fundamentally the overall aim was to reduce Commonwealth outlays on higher education. It had nothing to do with the philosophical positioning of higher education and everything to do with the cost to the Commonwealth of universities." This observation captures starkly the resource dilemmas encountered by newer entrants to the system since that time. The responses of New Generation Universities to the exacting financial stringencies they faced only a few years after their formation have included focusing and building on strengths; energetically recruiting international students; creating innovative and mutually beneficial partnerships with other institutions, providers, and the professions; engagement with local communities that emphasises reciprocity; and concentration and selectivity in research.

The risk, and probably the reality, is that given the way the language of higher education has mutated with the shift in the burden of payment, ideas and values embraced by stakeholders in the newer universities, such as social capital, social integration, the quality of life, the development of cities and regions, full employment, and reasonable expectations of a good education, have become less appealing to successive governments, and have been replaced by the discourse of the "market."

The impact of the relative difference in the resource base and capacity of newer and older universities to innovate is explored in *Growing Research—Challenges for Latedevelopers and Newcomers*, the report of a multinational research project undertaken by Ellen Hazelkorn of the Dublin Institute of Technology sponsored by the OECD.[8] This study of some 17 new and emerging institutions internationally cited the influence built up over time of older universities on policy and funding mechanisms as one of the systemic issues for all these new universities in developing their research. New institutions internationally see the strictures on their development not just as a matter of performing or competing effectively, but as a result also of the existence of an inherently uneven political process, the outworkings of which continue to favour the established institutions.

Distinctiveness and Academic Identity

Their straitened circumstances notwithstanding, the New Generation Universities have developed dramatically and distinctively over the last decade. Professor Michael Gibbons, Secretary-General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, holds

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[7] Chubb, 1997, "An Interview with Professor Ian Chubb," in *Australia's Future Universities*, ed. Sharpham and Harman, UNE Press.

[8] Hazelkorn, E., "Programme for Institutional Management of Higher Education 2002," *Growing Research: Challenges for Latedevelopers and Newcomers*, OECD

that "the new universities are particularly well placed to develop the types of teaching and research programs which are going to be the drivers of the new economy. In a time of rapid change the comparative advantage passes to universities that are not overly committed to the established way of doing things."

Words such as "innovative, exploratory, nimble, or adventurous" have been coined to characterise these institutions.[9] They have had to struggle to compete for funding, status, and recognition of the quality of their programs and achievements, but they are often able to respond to opportunities free from the constituencies of interest and disciplinary traditions that may act as an anchor on imaginative responses to opportunity and demand.

> Such opportunities may be to recruit students and staff from diverse professional and academic backgrounds, to learn and teach in innovative academic programs, to engage in multi-partner research across traditional discipline boundaries, to carve a special niche in community-focused education or to fashion a radically different management model to suit new educational purposes. New universities share a commitment to the efficacy of higher education in its social context. Many were established to serve the growing urban frontier around large cities or semi-rural communities or had their roots in colleges located in developing areas. They have established approaches to teaching that respond both to the changing times and to diverse student populations. Their research is anchored in contemporary socio-economic problems.[10]

New Generation Universities share other characteristics. Many attract a majority of first generation students and of those from low socio-economic groups. They often offer a second chance to mature-age students who, though very able, may not have had the opportunity, family encouragement, or expectation of going to university after school, if indeed they finished school. Many graduates of my own institution, of all ages, backgrounds, and places, embody extraordinary determination and courage in their personal journeys to graduation.

The future New Generation Universities will be characterised by partnerships and the building of clusters or groups with the same goals and strategic imperatives. In this way new institutions "can lead in the ethos and style of developing socially robust knowledge and production of distributed knowledge systems. This can be assisted by establishing links with many different organisations, and even with competitors, and by managing those zones where research agendas or program profiles are set."[11]

New Generation Universities were, in the main, created as part of broader regional development agendas; "their mission to provide economically useful skills with

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[9] Unpublished report of the New Generation Universities Conference, June 2002, p 5.
[10] Conference Report, 2002, op.cit. p. 5.
[11] Conference Report, 2002, op.cit. p. 1.

industrial relevance, to maintain academic excellence in a professional context, to ensure that academic activities are aligned with the economic development of their region has become inextricably linked to research."[12]

Research

The density of research activity in a university is largely proportional to its age or the historical happenstance of discipline mix, but excellence is judged and rewarded in similar ways across the national higher education sector. All Australian universities specialise and all have notable successes in their chosen fields. At the University of Western Sydney (UWS), for instance, the horticultural and plant sciences group has won $2.9 million in competitive grants for work on the impact of global warming on plant and crop growth. The construction technology team has lodged 20 patents and brought in $2.1 million since its establishment at UWS three years ago. The University's published output in educational psychology is ranked seventh internationally—the only Australian university in the world's top 30. It also hosts the premier Australian research group in the development of auditory perception and cognition focusing on the domains of speech, music, emotion, and hearing.

Dr Hazelkorn highlighted collaboration as the key to research for new universities:

Most research is conducted by individuals but the preferred situation is working in collaborative groups. Building research involves enhancing the nexus between teaching and research, including staff development, reconfiguring the mix of people through recruitment and training, and buying in research expertise. A culture of research must be developed but the constraints and barriers need to be recognised, including the tendency of government policy to favour older institutions. It is preferable to identify advantages, adopt selective policies, attract external funds and develop a resource base. New knowledge systems require new frameworks, and innovation can lead to a competitive advantage.[13]

The Network of New Generation Universities

The diversity of their courses, outreach, and scholarly enquiry notwithstanding, the Australia Network of New Generation Universities agree on core elements of their roles and values. The principles which the Australian Vice-Chancellors (Presidents) endorsed at the 2002 conference are that their institutions:

- support the creative transformation of an educated nation which fosters diversity, relevance, and engagement, and fosters emerging fields of national and regional significance;
- contribute to Australia's broader economic, social, and cultural agendas;
- support the development of diversity and centres of excellence in teaching and research which are defined by quality and strength, wherever they may be;

[12] Hazelkorn, E., "Progamme for Institutional Management of Higher Education 2002," *Growing Research: Challenges for Latedevelopers and Newcomers*, OECD.

[13] Conference Report, 2002, op. cit. p. 13.

- promote a higher education system that is engaged with the community and is responsive to it in a changing world;
- ensure that high quality teaching and research together form part of the mission of all universities;
- actively pursue public and private investment in the knowledge economy;
- work to ensure that all students have a comprehensive and comparable experience of higher education;
- without bias of any kind, endorse the recruitment and support of students with the ability and motivation to benefit from higher education; and
- lead the higher education sector in ways which do not reinforce institutional age and attributed prestige as driving factors in the allocation of resources.

Policy Imperatives for New Generation Universities

The active intervention by policy and funding mechanisms to increase diversity and competition through government directions have not delivered sustainable change or, indeed, encouraged robust diversity or esteem for different manifestations of excellence. Nevertheless, the histories and origins of many New Generation Universities have equipped them particularly well to harness the potential for innovation in research and education, to embrace regional and community engagement, to be at the forefront of professional education and delivery, and to contribute to an inclusive community—to be seen, and known, as "institutions without walls."

The government funding model for universities is the key policy instrument that will bring fundamental and far-reaching change to the Australian higher education sector, as well as harnessing the strengths and achievements of New Generation Universities, and will develop a sector characterised by meaningful and resourced differentiation based on missions, values, engagement and chosen specialisations. New incentives and concomitant recognition systems in this context would place issues of the quality of teaching, socially robust knowledge, applied and interdisciplinary research, community engagement, and social inclusion at the forefront of consideration. It would also recognise the development and leadership role of universities in their regions and communities.

Institutions that have legislative mandates to serve specific communities and regions or that have taken on the mantle of innovative educational pathways and enfranchisement of groups once excluded from higher education are performing roles of extraordinary importance. These roles do not sit easily with current policy and funding mechanisms; they are considered to be either supplementary or optional. For many newer universities, however, these roles are deeply embedded in institutional identity and purpose, and motivate the intellectual enquiry, learning, outreach, and research of their staff and students.

Conclusion

When or how might these challenges be addressed? As we write, the Australian federal government is finalising its policy and funding responses to a year-long and comprehensive review of university education under the banner *"Higher Education at the Crossroads."* This review commenced with a Ministerial Discussion Paper for which 355 written submissions were received in response, then travelled to all states for consultations attended by around 800 invited stakeholders. Afterward, six issues papers were developed, for which a further 373 submissions were received; the review sought steerage from a Reference Group comprising representatives of universities, unions, industry, and other constituencies of which one of us (Janice Reid) was a member.

At the inception of the review the Discussion Paper noted, "fourteen years after the last major reforms to higher education with amalgamations of Colleges of Advanced Education with universities and the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), it is time to take stock of where we are, where we want to go and how we intend to get there." The review also sought to address key questions such as: "What defines a university?" and "To what extent do scholarship, teaching, and research each mark a university as being such?"[14]

Notwithstanding the importance of these questions for the sector as a whole, they have particular resonance for New Generation Universities. Our own university's submission to the review noted that the University of Western Sydney is one of the New Generation of universities which were "established to reach a broader public, to respond to a growing demand for higher education and to be accessible in places where people lived." UWS argued also that "the universities of 50 years from now will have honed their mission and profiles successfully in response to demands for practical knowledge and lifelong learning, if and only if enabling strategies of government recognise and support both their growth and strengths."[15]

At the conclusion of the consultation phase the Education Minister, Dr Brendan Nelson stated that "it is clear our higher education sector needs reform" and that he looked to these reforms "to address issues of governance and university administration, workplace relations, financing, student access and equity of opportunity, attracting and retaining quality staff, university efficiency, responsiveness and specialisation."[16]

Australia needs to be distinguished by a world-class system of universities, all of which are at the forefront of discovery and the application of knowledge. Educational

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[14] Nelson, B., MP, *Higher Education at the Crossroads: Ministerial Discussion Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, p. (v).

[15] Reid, J., University of Western Sydney Submission in response to *Higher Education at the Crossroads*, June 2002, p 16.

[16] Nelson, B., MP, Media Release: *Two Day Forum to Conclude Higher Education Review*, October 2002, 193/02, www.dest.gov.au/minister/nelson/oct02/n193_021002.htm.

democracy requires a broad spectrum of disciplines and educational opportunities, which underpin a world-class economy, a just society, and one which invests heavily in and takes pride in the education of its people.

The Review outcomes will be known in May 2003. Commentators in the sector predict a range of policy and financing initiatives aimed at: deregulating fees paid by undergraduate students; allowing institutions to charge "premiums" above the standard "contribution" rate (postgraduate students already pay fees); implementing funding arrangements that encourage institutional specialisation; limiting the extent of student entitlement to loans schemes to a fixed period of study; loosening of government regulation and reporting requirements for institutions; providing greater access to the system and government support for private universities and other providers and their students; and emphasising increased access for students from educationally disadvantaged groups or communities.

New universities have a pivotal role to play in the Australian national system of higher education and will look to policy initiatives flowing from the review to create a flexible, supportive, and well-resourced environment in which they can develop and flourish. Australia, like other nations reforming their higher education systems, needs to work creatively and purposefully to have a united university system which is compelling in its intellectual productivity, competitive in its knowledge transfer, and a catalyst for community aspirations, reason, and for tolerance in intolerant times.

Note: This manuscript is an adaptation of a paper presented to the Higher Education Summit, March 2003.

Author Information

Professor Janice Reid has been Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Western Sydney since 1998. She is a recipient of several awards and honours both in Australia and overseas, and has been a member of the boards of public agencies at state and federal levels in the areas of health information and research, welfare, schools, higher education, energy, and international relations. In January 1998 Professor Reid was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to cross-cultural public health research and the development of health services for socio-economically disadvantaged groups in the community.

Rhonda Hawkins is the University Secretary for the University of Western Sydney. She is the Head of the Division of Corporate Services and provides strategic input and advice to the Vice-Chancellor and Board of Trustees for the successful management and governance of the University. The University Secretary has management responsibility for the operations of the Corporate Services Division, which include governance, compliance, legal services, records, human resources, and marketing and communication.

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