



The University of Sydney

Nurturing the Humanities

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'Managing the Humanities: From University to Public Life'

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sometimes the only consolation is that Australia does have a word for Philistinism.

Universities have long believed that the exploration of the human spirit – through literature, art, philosophy, music or our history – promotes and sustains a healthy society. Today, however, job-readiness through skills training is praised more often than is excitement and emancipation through humane study.

Who can nurture the humanities and how? Let us examine the challenges and responsibilities of the various players in the modern Australian university. Accepting that the humanities must enrich public life, how do we ensure their vitality?

2. CONTEXT OF COMPLAINT

I had better challenge my assumptions before venturing to suggest what those of us who are players should do.

There is surely little doubt that instrumental outcomes dominate the debate over structuring contemporary Australian higher education – indeed much of the concern has moved on to addressing skill shortages at pre-tertiary level. When we discussed student fees there was a weighing of private benefit versus public good but it was not so much the determination of relativities that worried me as the tendency to couch both in terms of economic gain. One side of the debate over Voluntary Student Unionism denies the collective value of humane experience outside the classroom and I cannot be alone in suspecting that it denies it within the classroom too.

The allocation of student places replacing previous marginally-funded overload was predicated on manpower requirements with regional considerations and on pressure of demand. The former appeared to outweigh the latter and the first is taken as a legitimate case for engineering, in the sense of central planning, and the second for response to market forces. In fairness, however, I must say that both Minister and Department helped me create many new places in liberal arts and sciences through a transfer manoeuvre and accepted, largely on faith, that demand would follow.

It is because I am living here and now that I bemoan a perceived threat to the humanities in Australian universities. In fact the phenomenon is not unique either in time or space.

I have a favourite quote from the middle ages when the citizens of Ferrara petitioned the prince for the re-establishment of a university there. Let me spare you the detail save to say that, after a respectful preamble it gets straight down to economic multiplier effect with the words, “For it to begin with its utility...” There are no discernible arguments based on cultural enhancement!

Much later in the mid-19th century Oxford had lost its way. Purporting to provide a well-rounded humane preparation for life (often as a clergyman) the academic environment was conservative, sloppy and self-satisfied. There were cutting attacks from utilitarian philosophers, especially in the *Edinburgh Review*, and John Henry Newman became the leading figure in re-vivifying the humanities and articulating a case for their pursuit.

I have cast this in such a way as to suggest that Newman was a reactionary as well as a reformer and it is not clear that his credo, more precisely the lazy invocation of his argument by others, has always served the humanities well. As a management text might put it “Is he dynamic and contemporary enough, even then?”

Just as there is nothing special about our times, it is not an Australian peculiarity that the humanities are threatened by utilitarian thinking. All too frequently I find myself speaking at international gatherings of university presidents. Independent of the set topic, a frighteningly high percentage of these colleagues give a progress report on their institutions’ achievements – and mostly in science and technology with dollar values attached! I feel sure that this reflects the resource pressures on higher education around the globe and the changing demands on university leaders. Very few could be described as humanists, and those who are so by training have often become, to adopt a phrase of Germaine Greer’s, humanists in suits.

Now let’s talk about things to do in Australia.

3. GOVERNMENT

This is difficult for me because I prefer to suggest to government what not to do rather than encourage intervention. In that spirit I would like to urge understanding of the complex non-linear relationship between university experience and employment capacity. Especially in a knowledge economy the important acquisition is not knowledge itself but the ability to source it, to sift it and to use it wisely. Such higher level attributes are developed through any rigorous study and there are many exemplars to prove it. This is not an argument in favour of the humanities only but its acceptance helps their cause. Moreover it supports the liberal view that graduate entry professional programs, where the precise nature of the first degree is not prescribed, are neither inefficient nor self-indulgent. My personal view is that diversity is desirable, so that I would prefer an aspiring lawyer to tackle something quantitative and/or scientific and an aspiring doctor to embrace the humanities. Ideally, of course, all undergraduate programs should be flavoured by the different dispositions of our research disciplines.

That brings me to the question of support for research and creative activity in the humanities. There is a tempting dichotomy wherein analysis and criticism are for the universities and creative work happens somewhere else. I believe that, on the contrary, maximum flexibility is desirable.

Lastly let me ask for courage from ministers in defence of projects which might be vulnerable to ill-informed criticism. The classic is, of course, "Motherhood in Ancient Rome", but I bet my team in Gender Studies at Sydney can produce some more any day.

4. VICE-CHANCELLORS

The most important task is to find the right people at the next levels to give strategic academic leadership for the humanities and to support them. In addition, one should be a public advocate for the position that no university is complete without vigorous creative scholarship in the humanities. Probably everything else is optional.

But let me describe some personal foibles. I have a firm conviction that creative scholarship must be demonstrated by publication validated by international peer review. Of course I can understand that contributions to Australian social policy, for example, are valid oeuvres but even these should incorporate awareness of transnational thought. I am sympathetic also to different patterns of publication in different fields and regularly remind medical scientists or engineers that, say, a literary scholar should not be compared according to simple publication count. On the other hand I become frustrated when attempts to define "research active" are reduced to a lowest common denominator by lobbyists from the humanities who do not argue against "one size fits all" but do argue for parity of esteem, and I am deeply suspicious of those who have only three friends in the world classy enough to evaluate their work.

While I can understand that research in the humanities is more individual than the collective effort of a chemistry lab, I try to encourage the development of centres of activity. As a pure mathematician, I am not entirely deaf to the assertion that a Ph.D. student can be more of a chore than a benefit but I still dislike hearing it said.

I accept that there should be a degree of cross-subsidy to smooth out the effects of a market-driven funding model. This applies to investment in research leadership as well as to support for teaching. This can be effected by a form of tax regime which, as you all know, annoys everyone; those who lose their earnings and those who feel they are given too small a bounty. It can also be arranged through course design. The crudest version comes through double degrees where students can take one leg for fun and one for imagined future income. We do, of course, organise programs with input from several disciplines but I believe that more could be achieved of this kind. Sometimes the problem can be inflexibility by the academics and I will touch further on that in a moment.

5. INDIVIDUAL ACADEMICS

This is where the power and responsibility lies. The strongest advice which I can give is “to thine own self be true”. Some years ago, I recall, Don Aitkin used to argue that non-scientists should promote their utility in specific terms like designing office configurations to promote effective human interaction and greater business efficiency. For me this is like Jacob putting on a sweaty coat of hair to simulate his brother Esau. The proper study of history, literature, philosophy, art must speak for itself with an authentic voice.

I do not advocate that one should be unworldly, more of that anon, but, if one believes as I do that humanistic study enriches the culture of society then one must live that belief. The problem, of course, is that communication must link the frames of reference of both parties. It follows that the scholar of humanities must show great patience and humility while retaining a firm inner conviction. (For an advanced skills test try masquerading as a pure mathematician at a cocktail party).

With the exception of the fluent generalist, one’s research tends to be both focussed and embedded in a specialist genre so that communication, even with colleagues in tangential fields, can be painfully slow. On the other hand, one cannot simply rely on steady accretion within the academy providing that societal impact we like to claim. It is as if we were creating the internal scenery of a limestone cave by infinitesimal increments and never admitting tourists. The cave is a powerful symbol in the humanities!

This is genuinely difficult territory with a lose/lose scenario. On the one hand it is possible to be drawn into over-simplification by an interlocutor, imagining that one is being faithful to the core concepts, only to be told “Well I understand it now and there’s not much to it”. On the other hand one can resist until the retort becomes “Obviously you don’t understand it if you can’t explain it to me”.

Let me attempt to illustrate this by reference to two philosophers to whom I have recently listened, Tu from Harvard and Lattimo from Turin. Tu comes from a cultural background of Confucianism and seeks to resolve this with Western Philosophy and then to apply his thoughts to current society. For this he must transcend language in the narrow sense and employ the cultural clues and symbols which we possess. Vattimo is a post-modernist who feels that liberation from the quest for absolute truth is an antidote to Webers's grim prediction that the managers will dominate society's spirit in the information age. He argues that the validity of each individual's separate interpretation of a text can lead to harmonious resolution with shared respect. Nobody will be burned at the stake in the name of abstract truth in his relativistic universe. Vattimo and Tu can share a stage and express mutual respect and conditional agreement.

This is certainly more immediately refreshing than logical positivism but requires an act of faith that the communication is meaningful. They lose some of my sympathy when, by extension, they remark that science and mathematics are meaningless because they over-simplify truth!

I am jesting, if not Pilate.

Teaching should be easier but I keep meeting students who are engaging, articulate, intelligent and blissfully ignorant of almost everything that was a shared cultural base when I was their age. It is this which leads to often misunderstood and sometimes misguided efforts to engage with contemporary popular culture.

None of this makes life easy for the humanist but it leaves little time for complaint because there is so much to be done. Descending to the practical level, let me mull over some suggestions.

Given that one believes that creative scholarship in the humanities is important then one needs to make sure it is funded. This can be achieved directly through competitive grants. Linkage grants, teaching relief funds, visitor support, travel support are all possible when pursued with vigour.

There are various indirect mechanisms. The most obvious is service teaching. By definition this means supplying clients with what they want rather than seeking out opportunities to do more of what is already done. Provided, however, one is a sensitive listener one gets the opportunity to shape the clients' understanding of their needs!

This applies across disciplines within universities and can also apply outside. The general principle that one uses one's research base, knowledge and training to provide additional cultural background to assist others to consider issues in a more informed way matches a fundamental core value – yet it can also provide income!

You may reasonably respond that there is nothing new here and, in a sense, that is true. My thesis is simple. Some years ago there was a tacit assumption that the humanities were a good thing and that universities should be funded as repositories of high culture. For various reasons – vastly increased access, iconoclastic turmoil within the academy itself, accelerated change of cultural norms amongst these reasons – we are no longer funded to do our own thing and offer some charitable outreach on the side. Now we must transact agreed outcomes ahead of funding and be accountable for delivery.

I believe it makes sense in that context to make a mental distinction between what we do for love and what we do for hire, and to cost both. I am inviting you to become hard-headed humanists!

Let me conclude with two apologies. First, I regret not being able to present these thoughts in person because I am leading a small delegation to the 2005 Beijing Forum which is a festival of the humanities and social sciences and their impact on the understanding of contemporary issues. It is largely financed by a Korean foundation. Secondly let me apologise for being too craven to discuss the Academy of the Humanities as a player – but, as a guest, I would not have the temerity to make suggestions. I do sincerely congratulate the Academy on holding this symposium and I am deeply grateful to John Hearn for presenting on my behalf.