

Vocational Education and the University: The Wentworth Medal Essay

SHARON BARNETT*

The University of Sydney—realm of academic majesty—lies in a sea. But the silver sea and the scepter'd isle of the Bard are distant reverie; the latter-day tides of an industrial metropolis clamour at its green and peaceful bounds.

In a sense both physical and intellectual, Sydney University thus embodies the paradox of the modern university: that of an ancient institution, defending its integrity and independence, yet dwelling in the midst of a technological society which nurtures it, uses it and, inevitably, assails it. It is a symbol of the time-honoured conflict between traditional scholarship and vocational education, the conflict which Harold Silver has called 'the liberal defence and the scientific prosecution'.¹

Vocational education—in common usage training for a specific occupation—'has no place in the university', say the purists. If they are to be heeded, universities will exist as the exclusive province of traditional liberal scholarship, the 'ever-elusive idea' of self-legitimizing universal knowledge.² Academia, in consequence, will forsake its worldly relevance and retreat into the ivory tower.

¹Harold Silver, 'Higher Education: the Contenders', *Universities, Society and the Future*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson, Edinburgh, 1983, 216-7.

²See Phillipson, 'Introduction', p. xii.

*Sharon Barnett was awarded first class honours in German in 1988 and first class honours and the University Medal in Japanese in 1989. Her essay, given here in a lightly edited version, was submitted in July and was awarded the Wentworth Medal Essay Prize in November 1989: since its writing events have moved rapidly, but without changing the main thrust of the argument.

Conversely, should the free-marketeers triumph, the university will function as a tool of industry, and its *raison d'être* will disappear.

But the age of extremes is past. Fundamental concepts have been re-defined in the light of an age of compromise, divided only by their spirit of pursuit. No longer is vocational education misconceived in limited terms of science and technology— even though these disciplines have been in the forefront of its thrust— and the 'scientific prosecution' has emerged as a manifestation of society's broader need. Concurrently, there is a reversion to a medieval image of general scholarship as a vocation in itself, and the modern scholar, utilising a liberal education for the purpose of a career, generates both personal and societal betterment in the manner of the 'professional public citizen' of old. Liberal scholarship flourishes in a vocational context; while science has been 'granted an indisputable intellectual content and hence [is] entitled to a respected part of liberal education'.³

Clearly, liberal and vocational studies can no longer function in isolation from each other or from the demands of the wider world. And no university can survive which closes its eyes to the fact that the vast majority of students must prepare for life in a practical, as well as a philosophical, sense. Compromise must prevail, through the medium of academic symbiosis.

In consideration of standards and criteria, rigid categorisations are not appropriate, but it is important to recognise the distinction between a technical and a professional vocation. While Silver rightly finds the vocabulary 'difficult to disentangle', it is nevertheless valid to distinguish a profession as a vocation demanding 'a commitment to the intellectual process':⁴ for example, architecture. Its place in the university is vindicated by intellectual concurrence and reciprocity—for no profession is an island—and by the fulfilment of a pre-determined academic standard. A craft, such as

³Edward H. Levi, 'The Place of Professional Education in the Life of the University', *Talent Waste*, ed. Philip C. Ritterbush, Washington, 1972, p. 113. John S. Brubacher, *On the Philosophy of Higher Education*, San Francisco, 1982, p. 83.

⁴Silver, 220-1. Levi, p. 116.

carpentry, is also 'vocational' in that it involves training for an occupation. But lacking an academic component, it is external to the concepts and intellectual requirements of an 'academic' vocation: a profession. The example is simplistic but illustrates that a vocation worthy of a university status must conform to the aforesaid 'professional' concept. The right to determine criteria must reside in the university itself.

Specialisation is frequently equated, and often confused, with vocationalism, but it is more particularly the pursuit of a specific line of *post-graduate* professional or research study, not necessarily implying immediate vocational intent.

The liberal-vocational issue involves recurring and contentious questions. What is the university's purpose? What are society's rightful expectations? Will integration of studies permit the maintenance of standards and the preservation of scholarship? Can the university serve its charter, society and the individual, yet maintain its integrity?

What is a university?

There is no inflexible definition. Over two centuries have passed since Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* simply described 'a School, where all the arts and faculties are taught and studied'; and the proliferation of learning in the twentieth century has drawn disciplines and institutions of unforeseen diversity under the university umbrella. The 'Society, Guild or Corporation' of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 'pursuing the higher branches of learning ... conferring degrees ... Universitas—the whole', is a limiting and incomplete concept based on the Oxbridge structure. The *Oxford* identifies the Latin etymology of 'university'; but fails to specify the functions of 'teaching and research at under-graduate and post-graduate level', recognised in the *Macquarie Dictionary*, which are integral purposes of the modern university.

None of these definitions, however, raises the fundamental conceptual distinction between traditional and technological universities. Playfair, in 1873, observed succinctly that it is 'the power of liberalising the professions that distinguishes universities from

technical schools'.⁵ Lord Robbins—whose watershed Report (1963) ushered in the age of the technologically-oriented university—delineated the difference of function and the complementary nature of the old and the new. He saw the old universities, cradled in humanistic professionalism, striving towards expanding graduate schools and playing a major role in the training of teachers. On the other hand, he perceived that 'the great technological institutions have reached out to pure science and then to relevant liberal studies and, in so doing, have in effect created a new type of university, although with a different centre of gravity'.⁶ The 'centre of gravity' is the essence of the matter: vocational education is the rationale of the technological university. To exclude it is a non-sequitur; it would simply invalidate the institution. Therefore the technological university, in philosophical concept, rests outside the scope of this discussion.

Whether or not an independent technological school should assume the name 'university' is yet another question, but is likewise extraneous to the discussion.

Private universities, in their infancy in Australia, are generally of intrinsic commercial/technological orientation and may be categorised as above: for example, Bond University in Queensland. There are notable overseas exceptions: Harvard is esteemed for the diversity of its curriculum. In 1978 it confronted the decline in the humanities by imposing a core curriculum, requiring the completion of five areas of study before specialisation and thus entrenching, in the medieval manner, the liberalisation of the professional vocations.

⁵Sir Lyon Playfair, 'Universities in Their Relation to Professional Education', *Subjects of Social Welfare*, London, 1889, p. 373.

⁶Lord Lionel Robbins, *The University in the Modern World*, London, 1966. See particularly 9-12, 50, 107, 141. Robbins saw the undergraduate course as part-preparation for a career, with a progression to specialised study within the university. He advocated more 'joint' degrees which would encourage potential schoolteachers. Cp. Playfair's similar views nearly a century earlier (Playfair, 369-92), and more recently a prediction of the inevitable fusion of the 'Schools of Medicine, Engineering and Business to prepare teachers for the schools of tomorrow', R. Ishler, 'Predicting the Educational Future ...', *Action in Teacher Education*, Spring/Summer 1984, 29-33.

In Australia, the contentious issue of amalgamations looms in debate; 'The binary system is dead', cry the media. Legislation before Parliament underscores the inevitability of mass amalgamations, prompting a Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University to observe that the nature of the university has been changed: 'They are becoming what I call compound universities, combining the functions of a traditional university with those of a college of advanced education'.⁷

Many academics, fearful of a diminution of standards, envisage a dark scenario indeed. Universities, they warn, are not created by imposing a title upon a motley collection of campuses. Incorporation of vocational colleges lock, stock and barrel may lead to the institution of sub-standard and inappropriate courses, may undermine the humanities and destroy academic integrity. In justification, both Sydney and New South Wales Universities—in rare and concerted scholastic defiance—have successfully confronted political attempts to network their institutions with certain tertiary colleges.⁸

Nevertheless 'it is not unreasonable to expect that most of the Colleges of Advanced Education [that are of academic merit] will in one way or another become Universities'.⁹ Sydney University has keenly advanced the creation of the University of Western Sydney

⁷Professor John Ward, 'Consolidations and Amalgamations', *The University of Sydney News*, 9 May 1989.

⁸'The October 1988 paper on restructuring of higher education put forward the notion of networks of institutions built up ... around an existing university. Sydney was to become a multi-campus institution ... The Academic Board ... decided to reject the notion ... That was a quiet, judicious refusal to adopt a scheme that would have damaged us academically and not helped the other institutions named. The matter was never raised again by the government.' *ibid.*

The proposal to amalgamate the University of New South Wales with a number of far-flung institutions (e.g., the Riverina/Murray Institute of Higher Education; Kuring-gai College of Advanced Education) was seen as 'absurd' by the academic staff and rejected out of hand. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 January 1989.

A Victorian State Government plan to absorb Deakin University, Geelong, into a Melbourne-based State university would see Deakin 'engulfed by an organisation which although called a university would not have university status'. *Connections* (Deakin University magazine), II.i.1 (June 1989).

⁹Ward, 'What is a University?', *The University of Sydney News*, 25 April 1989.

from existing colleges, in consequence of the judgment of its Academic Board that criteria have been satisfied.

What, then, does the university stand for?

‘Perhaps it will be the end of the university when it ceases to argue about its own meaning.’¹⁰ This meaning, and the significance of its changing role, may be better understood in the light of history. Precedent confirms both the co-existence and mutually complementary nature of liberal and vocational scholarship and illustrates the capacity of a ‘medieval product’ to perpetually modify and expand upon its basic structure, without notable effect.

The university, home of diverse and fruitfully co-existing disciplines, has prospered as the ‘embodiment of an educational ideal’: the search for truth in the revelation of knowledge. It is an aspiration in which modern scholars unite with their medieval counterparts. Citing the ‘ideal’ as the prime endeavour, Ferruolo emphasises its capacity to tolerate change and diversity.¹¹

The medieval Universitas was founded upon the spirit of professionalism and catered largely to graduate students in Law, Medicine and Theology.¹² The spirit of pure scholarship fulfilled an integral, but generally subordinate, preparatory role, providing a broad grounding for subsequent specialisation. The ‘useful’ arts were thus in harmony with, and complementary to, the ‘ideal’. Hugh of St Victor, a thirteenth century Master of Paris, proclaimed ‘the essential unity of all learning’; but he recognised the importance of the ‘logical and mechanical arts’ and warned against the ‘narrow

¹⁰Patrick Nuttgens, ‘Technology and the University’, Phillipson, p. 184.

¹¹Stephen C. Ferruolo, *The Origins of the University: the Schools of Paris and their Critics 1100-1215*, California, 1985, p. 3. See also Hastings Rashdall, *Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, 1895 (quoted in Ferruolo), and Craig R. Thompson, *Universities in Tudor England*, Washington, 1959. Cp. John Stuart Mill in 1867: ‘The university is part of the nation; it has changed, and is changing, and will change, with the nation.’ Quoted in Asa Briggs, ‘Traditions and Innovations in British Universities 1860-1960’, Phillipson, p. 191.

¹²Thompson, p. 1. Cp. Levi, p. 113: ‘If one traces the modern university to the medieval university, the professional education is central ... professional education was the reason for [the medieval] university.’

definition' which might eliminate their pursuit.¹³ Rejection of practical scientific education does not, therefore, bear convincing (early) historical witness.

Science, by no means the antagonist, was an important component of the medieval Seven Liberal Arts.¹⁴ These, in turn, were regarded as training for the profession of public citizen, or as a stepping-stone to professional specialisation. Furthermore, 'from Erasmus' day to our own, the primary function of ordinary university education has *not* been to encourage the pursuit of pure learning ... [but] to provide ... a broadly-based education ... to allow [students] to proceed to further professional education'.¹⁵ Even Cardinal Newman, the great defender of pure scholarship, grudgingly observed that 'If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society'.¹⁶

The popular exposition of the 'liberal defence' is a nineteenth century concept which reached its apogee in Newman's 'Discourses' of 1852. His subsequent monumental work, *The Idea of a University*, passionately advocated the philosophy of the unity and inter-dependence of knowledge, the virtue of pure scholarship and the primacy of religious truth. While accepting the 'special historical connexion' of Medicine, Law and Theology, he disparaged specialisation, professionalism or research within the university—but paradoxically observed that the interrelationship of all knowledge allowed for the exclusion of none. It was, he rationalised, a matter of intention: any discipline set within a multi-disciplinary context could assume a 'liberal' mantle. In contrast to the instrumentalist philosophy, which considers intelligence the means to an end, not

¹³Ferruolo, pp. 32, 35.

¹⁴The Seven Liberal Arts were composed of the Trivium, or literary group—grammar, dialectic and rhetoric—and the Quadrivium, or mathematical group—arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy.

¹⁵Phillipson, p. x. Erasmus viewed education as being '... for the good of the commonweal ... envisaging the formation of youth with all the learning needed to deepen their understanding of society, to make them familiar with its history, and to turn them into effective agents of moral good, equipped to move others to pursue the ends needed for the benefit of all'. James McConica, 'The Fate of Erasmian Humanism', Phillipson, p. 39.

¹⁶Cardinal John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*, London, 1905, pp. 191, 249.

the end in itself, Newman's rationalisation asserted that the purity of knowledge cannot be compromised by association with commerce or politics—and cannot exist without religious authority.¹⁷

In a social sense, Newman's theories were seriously flawed. Even as he wrote, the old order breathed its last—and the 'common man' marched into the groves of academe, staking his claim in an intellectual life, which had long since degenerated into a sinecure for the privileged few. In the process, he would change the face of higher education forever, divert its thrust to satisfy his professional needs, downgrade the humanities, and bring the new universities—the 'redbricks'—into the cities where he lived and worked. If ever there were a case of the university responding to society's contemporary needs, here it was, away from the fields of Oxbridge, in the dank and crowded streets of industrial England.

The old elitist notions lost their validity; higher education moved to a central place, inexorably drawn into the sphere of contemporary relevance; and vocational education expanded exponentially to accommodate the new technology and society's demands. Huxley in 1895 suggested the need to 'invert the whole of the edifice and make the foundation science, and literature the superstructure and final covering'.¹⁸

There were violent echoes of this Victorian revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. As the character of the student population again shifted—across an even wider spectrum—'there was a corresponding challenge to the relevance of the [perceived] conventional elite curriculum', manifesting itself in world-wide student unrest.¹⁹

¹⁷See Brubacher, p. 140.

¹⁸T. H. Huxley, *Science and Education*, 1893, quoted in F. S. L. Lyons, 'The Idea of a University—Newman to Robbins', Phillipson, p. 120.

¹⁹Brubacher, 1-2. In the United States, student rebellion forced the adoption of the Affirmative Action Program, and students were in the forefront of anti-Vietnam War activity. But the most dramatic events occurred in France, where in 1968 student violence spread to the workforce, virtually paralysed the nation, and ultimately precipitated the fall of General de Gaulle in 1969. The students won a voice in the administration of the universities and achieved a modernisation of the system.

Again, the universities responded to the change, expanding curricula in deference to an explosion of knowledge and to a new age of social justice. The liberal-vocational argument re-ignited. Kerr, in 1963, acknowledging the deep antecedent roots of the crisis, proposed nevertheless that both philosophies could be successfully held together on one academic campus.²⁰

It was the sunset of redbrick mentality, that 'over-riding purpose' of the industrial age. The dawn broke on a new renaissance of liberalism, and with it a realisation that the concepts of both liberal and vocational education had changed forever.

The perception of incompatible antagonists, existing in isolation, today stands discredited, and there is an acceptance of the need (as evoked so long ago by Woodrow Wilson) for a liberal education 'not only antecedent to ... technical training, but concurrent with it'.²¹

Today's employers are demanding 'thinking graduates', able to conceptualise and perform varied tasks: the Shell Company recognises that 'tomorrow's executives will have to be competent in a much wider field', while Japanese industry has demonstrated a preference for students 'with general knowledge and vitality [rather than] ... people with specialised knowledge'.²²

In response to such trends, in the name of 'intellectual mobility', of open-mindedness, of a general understanding of the world outside the confines of his vocation, today's student is offered a remarkable cross-section of functionally integrated disciplines. Thus Law combines with an aspect of the Humanities; the medical

²⁰C. Kerr, *The Use of the University*, 1963. Quoted in Brubacher, p. 4.

²¹Woodrow Wilson, Proceedings of the International Congress of Education, 1893, 116-7.

²²Alan Gibson, 'Inspecting Education', *Standards and Criteria in Higher Education*, ed. Graeme C. Moodie, Stratford, 1986, p. 129. Silver, p. 227. Cp. the need for 'integrating basic knowledge with experiential knowledge ... in reflection of [real life] issues', Leonard J. Duhl, 'A Social Psychiatrist's Point of View', *The University and the Urban Crisis*, ed. Howard E. Mitchell, New York, 1974, p. 185.

student undertakes sociological detours; Japanese studies incorporate optional instruction in tourism. The liberalisation of the professions has taken root; Playfair's point is validated as the traditional universities absorb vocational designs into the context of liberal scholarship, and vice versa. The emerging 'cross-fertilised' graduate is qualified in a particular profession, yet endowed to assimilate into an ever-diversifying society.

There should be no question of diminution of standards in such a system, provided academic control is assured.

The question of controls—and of who should administer them—is controversial and wide-ranging, involving academic and societal rights, accountability, political and commercial interference, autonomy and integrity.

Society's rights are, in a sense, society's perceptions, and the latter can vary wildly according to the status of the observer: 'a various mixture of specific demands and indifference, expectations and distrust', ²³ a grab-bag of contradictions and paradoxes. The university is expected to be independent yet accountable; to retain its mystique and be involved; to serve special interest groups and maintain standards and integrity. It has been remarked that universities today are testing tractors, overseeing historical societies, designing sewer systems—is it any wonder that there is confusion about purpose and suspicion about motives?

Simply, the university must never lose sight of its ancient purpose, but it must also demonstrate a willingness to extend its obligations to the society which created it. The basis of its modern obligation is the legitimisation of vocational education within the university.

However, political meddling is a spectre which transcends the bounds of accountability. With ever-increasing dependence on government funding, universities have become deeply susceptible to interference: for State support is predicated upon taxpayers'

²³The University and the Community: the problems of changing relationships, OECD, Paris, 1982, p. 31.

acceptance of the cost. Inevitably, the autonomous ideal has become un-enforceable.²⁴

Australian academics have denounced State-imposed amalgamations as 'unprecedented political interference and central regulatory control unknown anywhere else ...'. However Ashenden argues that 'Over the years [Australian] universities have affirmed their vocationalism ... Mr Dawkins has [only raised] the question of balance'.²⁵

But 'raising a question of balance' is a different matter from manipulating the curriculum. 'The curriculum of study', wrote Playfair in 1873, 'belongs to the university, the evidence of its fruition to the State.'²⁶ It is an apposite reflection for the twentieth century. The academic faculty are uniquely qualified and must remain unfettered by external pressure. They are 'in the best position to decide what parts should be included ... they must be the arbiter of whether their academic freedom has been imperilled.'²⁷ Moberly (1949) evokes the image of 'the republic of scholars'. He argues that, since the higher learning is a domain demanding expertise 'sophisticated beyond the ordinary ... it follows that only scholars are in a position to thoroughly understand its complexities'.²⁸ Society, the financier, is indisputably entitled to influence the constitution and management of the university, but its political agents have no right to interfere in academic curricular judgment. The State 'must draw the line at legislative restriction on intellectual freedom. If the State goes that far, it will have no university at all'.²⁹

The interaction of the university with industry must be treated

²⁴Lord Annan, quoted Lyons, Phillipson, p. 140.

²⁵Dean Ashenden, 'Why Dawkins should be applauded, not scorned', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December, 1988. (John Dawkins is the Federal Minister For Employment, Education and Training.)

²⁶Playfair, p. 387.

²⁷D. C. Bok, *Beyond the Ivory Tower*, Mass., 1982, p. 38.

²⁸Sir Walter Moberly, *The Crisis in the University*, 1949, quoted in Brubacher, 28-9.

²⁹Brubacher, p. 31.

with similar circumspection. Commercial involvement has a major influence upon concepts of what the university should do,³⁰ and when industry bestows with lavish generosity, it must be on the university's terms. But the university, in guarding against ill-motivated interference, must remain mindful of the fact that society has the right to expect relevance, The 1982 report of the OECD Business and Advisory Committee, representing employers' organisations, 'places particular stress on the need for the university to be linked to "the needs of the individual and his employment" and recalls at the same time ... the need to preserve high academic standards: "new groups should be welcomed, but without letting the academic standard be adjusted"'.³¹

It must also be remembered that the university is a commonality of *individuals* whose needs must be served. Research demonstrates that 'there are consistent vocational emphases across the whole range of student expectations', and that they expect priority to be given to a combination of intellectual and vocational goals.³²

Respect must also be accorded to the 'traditional' concept of liberal education, where no specific vocational intent is involved. Only the 'spirit of pursuit'³³ now divides the liberal-vocational path, and the spirit of pure liberal scholarship endures to fulfil an indispensable function. It is a valuable exploratory process for the student (and there are many) who is indecisive about career directions; and it creates fertile fields for the pure liberal scholar, frequently mature-age, who is in a position to pursue knowledge for its own sake and thus enhance his or her worth as an individual and as a member of society. Most importantly, the Schools of the Humanities are the watchdogs of literacy, a vital attribute occasionally neglected in the Schools of Science.

The pragmatism of compromise must be accepted within the

³⁰See *The Bulletin*, 31 January/7 February 1989, 80-5.

³¹The University and the Community, OECD, Ch. 2.

³²Silver, 228-9.

³³Sir Eric Ashby, *Technology and the Academics*, London, 1958, p. 75. Ashby pictured liberal education as 'a spirit of pursuit, not a choice of subject'.

framework of certain fundamental realities. These are the certainty of change, and society's right to expect relevant adaptation; the inviolability of academic integrity and of the principles of liberal scholarship (particularly in the light of increased independence and consequent diminished autonomy); and the acceptance of vocational education, historically and pragmatically, as a component of universal knowledge.

The world has changed beyond measure since, in 1850, William Charles Wentworth of Peterhouse, Cambridge, founded the University of Sydney on a hill on the fringes of the city 'to provide a liberal education in the colony'. Academic perceptions have also thankfully progressed since Dr John Smith, Sydney's first Dean of Medicine, opposed the establishment of the Medical Faculty on the grounds that it might drain funds from the more important Faculty of Arts.³⁴

Above all, the 'idea of a university' has changed immeasurably since Newman walked the stage. The days of the fortress are gone, the silver moat no longer insulates the castle of academe, and the complexities of the technological society must be faced and joined. If the realities are ignored, the university will wither and die, its concept 'fossilised like dinosaur bones in mud'.³⁵

But the pursuit of truth, revealed in knowledge, will always remain the underlying ideal and *raison d'être*. Newman's philosophy has an insistent relevance, albeit in a context he would have neither imagined nor sanctioned. Perhaps, therefore, he should have the last word:

They will be gainers by living amongst those ... who
represent the whole circle. He profits by an intellectual

³⁴ ... and delayed the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine by nearly two decades'! See *University and Community in 19th Century Sydney: Professor John Smith 1821-1885*, ed. Roy MacLeod, Sydney, 1988, pp. 60, 63.

³⁵ Roger Scott, "'University' is no fossilised term", *The Canberra Times*, 7 April 1989.

tradition ... he apprehends the great outline of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades ... Hence it is that his education is called 'Liberal' ... This then I would assign as the special fruit of an education furnished at a University ... this is the main purpose of a University.³⁶

The principles endure, even though the perspectives have changed. Liberal and vocational scholarship have conjoined, and fused; and there is no place for a university which excludes the spirit of their mutual pursuit.

³⁶Newman, 101-2.