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The Vigour of the Humanities and Social Sciences

To read some of the popular media commentaries and the morose accounts from some academics (see in particular Tony Coady’s account of the commercialisation of scholarship within the universities in his recent edited collection Why Universities Matter1) would leave a reasonable person, otherwise without countervailing knowledge, believing that most forms of teaching and scholarship in higher education (apart from the technological and commercial) were in dire peril. I am not in any way asserting that the crisis of decreased social investment in higher education in Australia is anything other than a totally misguided and dangerous form of public policy. It is an exercise in privatisation by covert accretion rather than through intensive and informed community debate. This is a policy informed by political rhetoric rather than by a careful, empirically-informed analysis of the capacity of private sources of funding to fill the voids in income created by significant reduction in public investment. The major issue is that these depletions in investment are not felt equally across all disciplinary sectors in higher education. They have a different and unequal impact depending on the capacity of the various disciplinary sectors to attract fees income from

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international and local fee-paying students, donations, and other substantial gifts from industry sufficient to substitute for and even outstrip the funding for academic activities of teaching and research which have suffered from public investment depletion. It is the disciplines in the generic faculties of the liberal studies, the humanities and social sciences, whose endeavours to replace public with private sources of income are less likely to yield sufficient amounts of replacement income from private sources in the commercialisation ethos prevalent in contemporary Australian economy and polity.

The orthodox accounts of gloom put forward by both right- and left-wing commentators must however be challenged because of their inability to see and appreciate the strength, energy, imagination and innovation which are infusing the preservation and renewal of study and scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, and the evident attraction which these innovations provide to new and potential students. And the fact that this re-invention and re-imagining is occurring within a context of deep fiscal constraint and significant reduction in social investment makes it all the more paradoxical and all the more necessary to highlight and understand.

I begin with four stories to embellish my theme.

First: on Sunday 16 April 2000 the Department of Italian Studies and the University of Sydney Italian Studies Association held ‘Dante 2000’ in the Great Hall of the University—an all day reading in Italian or English of selected cantos from Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy. The readers were drawn from journalism, creative literature, theatre and cinema, politics, the law, and academic life. The day, Palm Sunday, was chosen to mark the 700th anniversary of the commencement date of the visionary journey described in its three parts: Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise. During the course of the day, a changing audience of between 80 and 150 people, mostly drawn from the wider community, enjoyed with evident pleasure these readings from one of the most important texts of Western medieval/renaissance literary, religious, philosophical, and
political scholarship. Religious and political thought, poetic brilliance, and philosophical imagination are here brought into synthesis by a man who practised all of them. This event was a contribution to scholarship which moved beyond the walls of the University to speak with a strong and compelling voice.

Second: on Saturday 29 April 2000 the Department of Music in the Faculty of Arts organised the launch of a compact disk on the Dreaming Songs of the women of the Warumungu language group around Tennant Creek—Aboriginal women’s songs of love and healing. This was an integral component of the twenty-third National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia and the seventeenth Annual Conference of the New Zealand Musicological Society, whose conference theme for the day was a symposium on research in Indigenous music. The CD, entitled ‘Yawulyu Mungamunga’, derives from and celebrates the Mungamunga spirit beings whose songs and attendant dances have been passed on through generations of Warumungu women, and the songs teach about the local country and history around Tennant Creek. The production of the CD was a close collaboration between scholars from the departments of music and linguistics in the Faculty of Arts, the Tennant Creek community, the Papulu Apparr-Kari Language and Culture Centre, and Festival Records. At the launch in the Seymour Centre, Warumungu women dancers and singers from Tennant Creek joined with researchers and scholars in musicology in celebrating this intensely moving cross-cultural, cross-linguistic and cross-musical event and its underlying research and community participation.

Third: on 4 May 2000 Gaynor MacDonald of the Department of Anthropology in the Faculty of Arts delivered a lecture in the Research Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences college lecture series, entitled Disputing Culture: the Native Title Experience in Central NSW. Her lecture explored her own experience working with Wiradjuri Aboriginal communities over two decades and in particular focused on the community’s mobilisation of processes to engage with Native Title legislation
to reshape their relations with the state and with each other. Dr MacDonald noted in particular that in contemporary Australia, Aboriginal beliefs and practices are regarded as authentic only if seen to be unchanging since time immemorial, whereas it is only to be expected that under any conditions, and particularly under conditions of colonisation, social systems will undergo processes of transformation. Her theoretical contribution was to understand the nuances of transforming cultures, as they engage with official state law and practice and also with rapidly changing economies and the surrounding non-Aboriginal communities. She accorded to Aboriginal cultures the dignity of subjectivity—action to transform themselves, just as social scientists and humanities scholars accord to non-Indigenous communities the dignity of subjectivity, recognising the transformation of languages, literatures and social institutions.

Fourth: at a Faculty of Arts Graduation Ceremony on 11 May 2000, the Occasional Address was delivered by Kate Grenville, eminent Australian author and Honorary Associate of the Department of English, an honours graduate in English literature from the University of Sydney and author of novels including *Lilian's Story* and most recently, *The Idea of Perfection*. She spoke lyrically and compellingly about the value of education in the humanities and social sciences in imbuing the capacity to imagine, to create ideas, to imagine futures, and she also insisted that education in the sciences had a similar value, educating for the capacity to imagine. In particular, she refuted the notion of an arts/science schism—a schism between the apparent ivory tower, hermetically-sealed knowledge of the humanities on the one hand, and the useful sciences on the other. The bridge-builders imagine their bridges and the workings of cement and metal just as the students of literature, history and philosophy use their imagination to understand the cultures of past, present and future, all of course in the humanities, social sciences and the sciences based on the best available evidence and research.
How are students responding to innovation in humanities and social sciences?

Far from declining, student load in the Faculty of Arts (HECS-liable plus international and other fee paying students) has increased by 26 per cent (1996-2000). In which programs are these students enrolling? Of the approximately 2000 HECS-liable commencing students who enrolled in one of the fifteen degree programs in the Faculty of Arts in 2000, 60 per cent entered the BA degree and 40 per cent entered either one of the combined degrees or one of the specialist four-year degrees. The more specialist and more directed degree programs with smaller entry quotas (compared with the BA) are designed to attract talented students who seek explicitly to combine their foundational studies in the humanities and social sciences with more vocational/professionally-oriented studies. These include combined degrees (five years in length), of which there are now nine such programs, in which the student is able to undertake studies in the humanities and social sciences combined with degrees in Law, Education, Commerce, Engineering, Music, Social Work, Nursing, Theology, and Science. In the case of Arts/Science, the student undertakes a combination of two generalist degrees, clearly with the desire to bridge the 'two cultures' and break down the dangerous cultural stereotype of their disjuncture.

The specially designed degree programs from 2000 include five four-year degrees, whose purpose is to enable the student to undertake foundational studies in the humanities and social sciences, integrated closely with study in a more professional/vocational field. The only exception is the original template for these four year degrees—Liberal Studies—introduced in 1998, in which the student must undertake a major in the humanities, a major in the sciences, four semester units of a language other than English in one language area (more than one foreign language may be studied), a unit of mathematics or statistics and a unit of English communication. This degree is clearly an exemplar of generalist study undertaken by students determined
not to be channelled out of either humanities or sciences and interested in undertaking foreign language study.

The four other four-year degrees—BA (Media and Communications), BA (Informatics), BA (Languages) and Bachelor of Social Sciences—are concerned expressly to emphasise both the generalist, analytical, humanities bases of study in combination with vocationally-oriented opportunities, and have either an internship component (BA (Media and Communications) and Bachelor of Social Sciences), or an in-country study component (BA Languages), or a research project component (BA Informatics).

Does this mean that students undertaking the three-year BA degree are in a sense ‘left behind’? This is an argument which must be vigorously refuted. One of the trends which indicates that the BA has its own identity at the University of Sydney is the number of three-year graduates who go on to study in a fourth year in the BA Honours program. Of the students graduating in 1998 on the completion of a three-year pass degree, 62 per cent entered further study in higher education, and of these one half enrolled in an honours degree. This means that about 30 per cent of graduating students in the BA pass degree (which may be the BA or a combined degree, in particular Arts/Law or Arts/Science) enter a fourth year of study, specialising in research in their chosen disciplinary or inter-disciplinary field.

Although the data are from different points in time and are not strictly comparable, they do suggest that of incoming students in 2000:

- 40 per cent are in combined (five year) or specialist (four year) degrees;
- 60 per cent are in the BA degree (three years), of whom at least 30 per cent are likely to enter the honours stream through undertaking ‘special entry’ units and go on to complete a BA Honours degree (four years);
- the majority of students currently in the early years of study in the humanities and social sciences (about 58–60 per cent) will undertake a degree or degrees which are
between four to six years in duration (since a highly talented number undertake an additional year in a combined degree program to complete an honours year, and this comprises six years of study);

• of the students who graduate with a three year BA degree, more than 60 per cent will continue full-time studies in higher education, of whom at least half will undertake an honours degree and the other half will undertake postgraduate studies or enter a second undergraduate degree, as they had originally planned.

These data are presented in order to make the following observations. Degree programs have been and continue to be the subject of re-invention, imagination and innovation and in the process speak compellingly to students who are educationally, intellectually and culturally stimulated to study in the humanities and social sciences. They are enabled to do so in ways which bring them into active engagement with new knowledge, new ideas, new ways of learning, while acquiring and building on rich lodes of traditional knowledge. Armed with both knowledge and generic skills (the two cannot be separated as they are acquired in conjunction with each other), they are stimulated to create new careers and professions. Far from being the end of the humanities and social sciences, these trends are emblematic of their re-imagining and re-invention, and students find this an exciting realm.

The Dangerous Dichotomy between Knowledge for its own Sake and Economically Useful Knowledge

Students and academics in the humanities and social sciences are undertaking studies in fields which are central to the social, cultural, linguistic and intellectual development of Australian society, central to our living standards and quality of life. Scholarship and research in the humanities and social sciences are imbued with the spirit of learning for its own intrinsic human, social and cultural values, and these studies are as vocationally
relevant as the more apparently professional fields of scholarship. There is a pervasive view that a dichotomy exists between, on the one hand, learning for its own intrinsic pleasure—the thirst for knowledge and understanding both of the contemporary world and of the past—which has shaped our diverse cultures, languages, literatures, music and artistic expressions, and, on the other hand, learning which is seen as vocationally oriented. This is a dangerous dichotomy. Scholarship is concerned with acquiring, understanding and applying knowledge. It involves rigorous analysis and critical inquiry, interpretations of human life and of our social and cultural institutions, the development of new ideas, and new ways of understanding and shaping our futures. In particular, it involves and develops the capacity for clear communication. All this is as relevant and ‘useful’ in the worlds of employment in the professions, government, business, industry and the community services as are studies within more narrowly designated professional boundaries. The contributions made and yet to be made to the social and cultural development of Australia and our region by the intensive study of history, English and Australian literature, philosophy, anthropology, archaeology, European, Asian, Middle Eastern and classical languages, sociology, linguistics, music and art history, are as significant as the contributions made by science, technology and commerce. It is the interconnections of all these fields of inquiry and endeavour which are necessary to ensure the best distribution of high living standards and the enhanced quality of social and cultural life. We may inherent scholarly traditions of high standing because we stand on the shoulders of giants, but even more importantly, we are participating in the re-imagining and with that the creation of future institutions and their meanings.

To conceptualise this synergy between knowledge which is intrinsically intellectually significant and useful and extrinsically useful in the economy, polity and society, I turn to Martin Krygier’s 1997 Boyer Lectures for the ABC. In the final lecture, he writes ‘In Praise of Hybrid Thoughts’. His objective is to
imagine a coming together of the lineaments of a moral/political philosophy as a guide for action in the world which integrates the best strands of conservative/liberal/social democratic thought, so as to establish through both personal responsibility and social responsibility (which is the role of social institutions and the state) the best possible conditions in which all have a genuine freedom and opportunity to participate in communal life.


Personal responsibility is most likely to flourish when there is genuine opportunity to participate in communal life. These conditions require substantial investment by the community and its institutions. At the same time, how much the community invests and what kind of investment it makes will depend on the prevalence of a sense of personal responsibility for the common good.³

It is my claim for humanities and social sciences education and scholarship that these understandings about personal and social responsibility are the vital, essential contributions which we make to the total life of our communities, to the nation and cross-nationally. And it is the nascent understanding of this, elaborated further through the education process, which brings the students in increasing numbers to study with us.

While this vibrant recreation and re-imagining of our education and scholarship is proceeding in the humanities and social sciences, there is a concurrent decline in public investment in and government priority accorded to higher education in Australia. To what extent then is social responsibility meshing with private responsibility?

The three volumes of a major report prepared by a Reference Group for the Australian Academy of the Humanities and published in 1998 under the title *Knowing Ourselves and Others, The Humanities in Australia into the 21st Century* outline a grim picture of the state of play in the humanities in Australian universities.⁴ The grim picture does not reside in the creative and productive buoyancy of the numerous intellectual and
academic projects across a broad range of disciplines and cross-disciplinary studies being undertaken in Australian universities, often in partnership with overseas universities and with scholars in other milieux in Australia. The grim and disturbing picture resides in the failure of successive Commonwealth Governments for at least fifteen years to direct sufficient public investment to higher education, a trend growing steadily more evident with significant cuts to university recurrent funding since 1996 and the decision not to augment funding to cover long-overdue salary increases awarded by universities under various enterprise agreements. These policy decisions have had a significantly deleterious impact on teaching and research across the board, but it is in the humanities, in particular, that the effects of resource deprivation have been the harshest.

Peter Karmel, in his submission to the West Inquiry, notes the dimensions of the crisis confronting investment in higher education: government outlays on higher education reached a peak of 1.5 per cent of GDP in 1975–76, and have since fallen to one per cent following successive budget cuts. Karmel also notes in his contribution to the Coady collection that there has been ‘a significant long-term decline in the Government’s commitment to funding higher education in relation to the scale of the Australian economy’. In the recent excellent series on higher education and its future in the *Australian*, Paul Kelly takes a similar position, using the May 1998 Budget papers to show that as a percentage of total federal government outlays, higher education funding fell from 3.1 per cent in 1994–95 to an estimated 2.2 per cent in 2001–02. Kelly designates the significance of this as a ‘distinct drop in universities as a federal priority’. At the same time, over the period 1987 to 1997, total student enrolments increased by 67 per cent, (an increase of 58 per cent for undergraduate enrolments and 116 per cent for postgraduate enrolments). This indicates a democratisation of access which must be applauded and encouraged, but the confluence of these trends has resulted in a decline in investment in higher education resources on a per student basis.
The counterpart to contractional policies by successive governments with regard to public outlays for higher education has been their promotion of policies designed to increase income from non-government sources, expected to come in part from business and industry, but predominantly through student fees. The process was initiated with the widespread introduction of fees to be paid by international undergraduate and postgraduate students (a measure introduced by the former Labor Government). This was followed by the Coalition Government’s decision that most local postgraduate coursework students would be expected to pay fees as government funding was progressively removed from the teaching of these courses, making it increasingly necessary for universities to introduce fees for most postgraduate courses. This culminated in 1997 (for 1998) with the permission and encouragement given to universities to introduce up-front fees for a set proportion of local undergraduate students (as an addition to the intake of students who contribute to public revenue in their tax payments through their HECS liability). In addition, students who are not full-fee paying but HECS liable students contribute about 35–40 per cent of universities’ operating costs with their HECS payments. As a result of such changes, the Commonwealth contribution to university funding fell to 50.8 per cent in 1998 and this percentage is predicted to fall further by 2002 to about 45 per cent as the proportion of funding derived from HECS payments, student fees and other income sources increases.

Such private income generation measures however were not effective in raising sufficient funds to ensure that the increase in student numbers was matched by a commensurate increase in staff. The significant increase in student enrolments in university education over the period 1988 to 1996, translated into the language of student load, was of the order of 49 per cent. But over this same period academic and general staff numbers increased by only 26 per cent. In other words, the increase in student numbers was almost twice that of the increase in staff (a ratio of 1.9:1).
These discrepancies are most marked when we look at the resourcing of humanities and social science teaching in Australian universities. Between 1990 and 1996 the measure of student load, equivalent full-time student units (EFTSU), increased by 28.4 per cent across all disciplinary groups, while the increase in academic staff (full-time equivalent) was only 18.1 per cent. Thus the overall increase in student load outstripped the increase in academic staff by a ratio of 1.6:1. In the humanities, however, over the same period, student load increased by 22.1 per cent and academic staff numbers by only 7.8 per cent, student increase therefore outstripping staff increase by a ratio of 2.8:1. In the social sciences, student load increased by 36.6 per cent, while academic staff increased by 23 per cent, student load increase outstripping staff increase by a ratio of 1.6:1, the same as the average ratio. What we are seeing here is a significant fall in teaching and research resources across the board when compared with increased student numbers, and a cross-subsidy in university teaching away from the humanities in the context of overall resourcing. As the resources necessary for teaching and research have been unable to keep pace with increased student enrolment, it is in investment in the humanities that the resource gap is most evident.10

Why does this matter? It matters if we cease to conceptualise government spending on higher education (indeed on any form of education and training) as an outlay, and redefine such outlays as social investment. This is the position adopted by a number of commentators on education policy in the OECD countries, who argue that a social investment approach focuses on the maximisation of social as well as economic returns in the form of increased knowledge and the skills of the workforce and of the general population, such that the acquisition of knowledge and skills should be treated as assets in the national accounts, rather than as government outlays. Further, it is argued that investment in education results in enhanced social cohesion and active social participation as well as enhanced workforce participation, compared with the counterfactual increase in social
exclusion, unemployment and social fracturing evident in many of the OECD countries over the last decade. Despite this, Australian governments persist in seeing public investment in higher education as a drain on national resources rather than as a contribution to national assets, as if there were not sufficient long-term returns through greatly enhanced knowledge and skills acquisition and research outcomes to justify such investments. The implication of the arguments put in various OECD publications is that without sufficient emphasis on social investment in education, the quality, productivity and integration of the labour force, of civic communities, of cultural and intellectual life are seriously impoverished.

The data indicate that national higher education policy in Australia over at least the last decade has focused on reduction in social investment and greater reliance on non-government sources of funding, but these private sector strategies and greater recourse to student fees income have not been sufficient to enable staffing—the key asset in universities—to keep pace in any adequate way with the increase in student numbers. In this context, investment in humanities teaching has been hardest hit.

The value of education and research in the humanities and social sciences

Why does the overall diminution in public investment in higher education compared with the increase in student demand in the humanities and social sciences matter? What intrinsic value can be accorded to humanities and social sciences teaching and research, what social and economic assets, at individual and societal levels, are acquired and accumulated through study and research in these disciplinary and inter-disciplinary fields?

There is a range of sources and types of value:

1. Humanities and social sciences education and research transmit and generate accumulated and new knowledge about human/social experiences, institutions, cultures, ideas and aspirations, and ways to conceptualise and critically analyse
this knowledge—knowledge which is essential for understanding our histories, languages, literatures and identities in Australia, for understanding the Asia-Pacific region, European cultures, and our varied Anglo-Celtic, European, Middle Eastern and Asian heritages.

2. Such studies have enabled us to interact, through languages acquisition, literary analysis, historical, philosophical and socio-political-economic analysis, with the communities and institutions of civil society, with scholars, governments and business in other Anglophone countries, in Europe, and in the Asia-Pacific regions.

3. Humanities and social sciences education and research have generated understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and languages, and of the profoundly damaging consequences of European colonisation on Indigenous peoples’ sources of livelihood, health and connections with ‘country’. Such education and research have generated knowledge about and recognition of the dislocation of Indigenous people from land, family, heritage, culture, spirituality and identity. This knowledge is essential to the process of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal reconciliation and to considering, in collaboration, the forms which this process might take.

4. Humanities and social sciences education and research have been, and remain, fundamental in understanding and promoting the values of critical inquiry, intellectual freedom, democracy, and ethical practices, in the cultivation and expansion of citizenship, and in preserving a realm of civil society which is distinct from economy and state, fostering respect for linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity. It is the appreciation of the diversity of cultures, languages, literatures, art, religious beliefs, while also recognising the contiguities of human aspirations, creativity and community-building, which constitutes the heart of the matter in humanities and social sciences education and research.

5. Humanities and social sciences education and research play
a vital role in the creation, transmission, and renewal of public culture—in art, music, literature, museums, theatre, cinema, broadcasting, print media, libraries, various forms of computer-generated media, in the whole range of ways in which innovation, creativity and community life are expressed.

6. Humanities and social sciences education and research encourage and provide the skills for informed questioning and critical analysis, and with that the capacity to imagine and debate alternative futures, where ethical questions can be asked about the elements of a humane and just society, where material and cultural resources can be produced, distributed and enjoyed according to tenets of fairness, human autonomy and dignity.

7. In sharp contrast to the view that humanities and social sciences education and research are separate and cut off from the communities which constitute their subject matter, in reality such education and research are vital contributors to cultural, social, economic and political well-being.

Who believes in these theories of value?

Students most certainly do, as evidenced by their attraction to studies in the humanities and social sciences, which is far from abating. They are expressing their preferences for spending longer periods of time integrating their foundational studies in the liberal arts with what they perceive to be more vocationally and professionally-oriented studies, and come soon to realise that the two modes of learning are not distinct but intermingle with each other and enrich each other.

There is growing evidence that parts of industry and business also appreciate the knowledge and skills which graduates acquire in the course of their humanities and social sciences education. In Minister Kemp’s *Higher Education Report for the 2000–2002 Triennium* (December 1999) is a report on a study of ‘Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills’. AC Neilsen Research was commissioned by DETYA to conduct a project to
establish the extent of employer satisfaction with the skills of new higher education and TAFE graduates entering the labour market. They were asked to:

- determine which skills employers are seeking when recruiting graduates;
- determine the relative importance of different skills;
- identify any perceived deficiencies in new graduate skills.

And what did they find? The skills most valued by employers were:

- creativity and flair;
- oral communication;
- independent and critical thinking.

The highest rating higher education graduates overall had either arts/humanities/social sciences education or economics/business/administration qualifications. It is apparent that the value of education in the humanities and social sciences—generic foundational education—is appreciated by the employers of graduates.

Who are the employers of graduates in the humanities and social sciences? Data for first degree graduates from the 1999 Graduate Destination Survey, collated nationally by the graduate Careers Council of Australia, indicate that for University of Sydney Arts graduates, one half continued with further full-time university studies, as has been the case historically. Most of these graduates were either continuing to an honours degree or completing their second degree in a combined degree program. Others enrolled in postgraduate programs. Of those who were in employment very soon after graduation, two thirds were in private sector firms, 17 per cent in government employment, six per cent in community sector employment and ten per cent were employed in education. The employers of Arts graduates ranged through the Department of Immigration and the Department of Work Place Relations, the Art Gallery of NSW and the Historic Houses Trust, the Police and Fire services, the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, primary and secondary schools, the print media, television and radio, banks, insurance and other financial
institutions, the hotel industry, large accounting and consulting firms, telephone companies, the Sydney Film Company, and other employers.

What this list indicates is the diversity of employers who value Arts graduates. What the overall graduate destination figures indicate is that about half of Arts first degree graduates are enthusiastic enough to continue their studies. This is not because they cannot find employment—it is because the underlying three year BA degree is being fully understood and valued for what it is: a foundational degree in the liberal arts, the intellectual infrastructure of most careers and professions. If the foundations are threatened, the edifices fall.

What of public responsibility as evidenced by public investment in higher education in which these foundational studies are located? At this point at the beginning of a new millennium there is little evidence over the last decade and certainly not in the federal budget for 2000/2001, which was silent on higher education investment, that the public side of the private/social responsibility nexus has been accorded any priority. We have a long period of debate and engagement ahead, and it appears likely that the professions, employers, alumni as well as academics, will seek to engage in this debate which is central to Australia’s intellectual, social, cultural, economic and political future. It is imperative that we do so, and do so vigorously and armed with evidence. Evidence-based debate is the responsibility of academics, but the project requires more—commitment and conviction and the capacity to forge alliances with the other sectors of the Australian community who understand the value of the humanities and social sciences and the benefits which flow from their study.

Notes


