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# Higher education policy and cultural change in universities

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# Higher education policy and cultural change in universities

## **Abstract**

Over recent decades, there has been a shift in the perception of the purpose of universities, and this has been accompanied by substantial cultural, academic and management change. In Australian universities, the discarding of the old view of 'The University' can be given a date, more-or-less. The Australian Commonwealth Government's policy document of 1988, the White Paper<sup>1</sup>, foreshadowed many changes in universities. The ideas in the White Paper had been around for some time and can be traced back to the sixties. Pressures for change came from business and from economic and cultural changes in society. New technologies contributed to change and to the need for people trained to deal with a greater complexity in society.

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## RODNEY NILLSEN

### HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN UNIVERSITIES

#### **The old and the new**

Over recent decades, there has been a shift in the perception of the purpose of universities, and this has been accompanied by substantial cultural, academic and management change. In Australian universities, the discarding of the old view of 'The University' can be given a date, more-or-less. The Australian Commonwealth Government's policy document of 1988, the White Paper<sup>1</sup>, foreshadowed many changes in universities. The ideas in the White Paper had been around for some time and can be traced back to the sixties. Pressures for change came from business and from economic and cultural changes in society. New technologies contributed to change and to the need for people trained to deal with a greater complexity in society.

There were pressures also from within universities, from administrators and staff who were critical of the older culture, and who took their cue from government and wider society. The White Paper, when it finally came, had a dramatic effect. Change, it seemed, was to come all at once in a new 'unified national system' of universities. The ensuing twenty five-plus years saw a consistent direction in higher education policy. However, the changes came gradually over a long period, and it is relatively recent that the accumulated consequences have become more obvious. There was undoubtedly within the universities themselves a degree of enthusiasm for the White Paper policies, notably from management, and from more socially concerned academics, although for different reasons.

Some consequences of the White Paper were that universities were to raise more of their own funds so that over time they became essentially businesses, student numbers increased, distinctions between colleges and universities were abolished, collegiality withered as management became 'top-down', and government exerted a form of indirect control over universities by imposing a new, repetitious, and promotional language which reflected changed priorities.

Perhaps the most fundamental of the White Paper policies was the change in the basis on which higher education could expect to receive government funding. Thus, noting a hint of menace, we read:

In developing their teaching proposals related to growth in the system, institutions will be expected to give priority to disciplines relevant to national social, economic and industrial development needs.<sup>2</sup>

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This paper is an extended version of a presentation given at the Annual Conference of the Independent Scholars Association of Australia, held at the National Library in Canberra, Australia, from 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> October, 2016. This paper will appear in the conference proceedings later in 2017.

Of course, the pervasiveness of economic considerations has not been restricted to education policy. The dominance of liberal economics in public policy has affected even those policy areas seen previously as incompatible with a pure economic viewpoint. Thus, Coaldrake and Stedman are almost certainly correct when they wrote recently:

It is probably the case that the contemporary university will stand or fall on the perceptions of its economic benefits.<sup>3</sup>

In the older culture, universities were seen importantly as cultural institutions contributing to society by virtue of their *difference from* wider society. In the new culture, universities were seen as contributing to society by virtue of their *incorporation into* society. It is arguable that in Australia the ideas of John Henry Newman<sup>4</sup>, as a representative of the older culture, had little effect, although the cultural aspect of universities was strong in the educational ideas and policies of Sir Robert Menzies.<sup>5</sup> However, the discussion about the purpose of 'The University' is still alive to an extent, as evidenced by the exchange of views between Raymond Gaita and Glyn Davis.<sup>6</sup> The changes have been all the greater for universities in that, over the same period that they were changing to conform more to society, society itself was in a state of flux as a broader sense of community faded, liberal economics dominated public policy, and human activities were reduced to their material, economic and competitive aspects. These changes are considered in the remainder of this paper under some of their different aspects. In turn these are: knowledge, teaching, scholarship and education; language, marketing and management; and the wider issues arising, for the changes in universities can be seen as consequences of substantial cultural and economic changes in western societies.

### **The new attitudes to knowledge, teaching, scholarship and education**

One change that occurred was the abolition of many prerequisites for study, which were replaced by 'assumed knowledge'. This meant that the ultimate responsibility as to the prior knowledge needful for a course or subject was placed upon the student, even though the student often was not in a position to make an informed judgment.

The changes in prerequisite policy were pragmatic, so as to facilitate enrolment of a broader range of students, by removing barriers to enrolment. But pragmatic changes can have wider implications. In this case, knowledge implicitly was seen as having less structure, so that a logical order or progression of subjects became of lesser importance. This was consonant with the idea that knowledge consisted of discrete bits of information, not necessarily with an overall structure, unity, or logical development. The changes had a greater effect on disciplines where knowledge is more structured and builds on prior understanding, but the changes were regarded purely as management decisions that had no consequences other than facilitating enrolments.<sup>7,8</sup>

Managements installed assessment regimes that accentuated the idea of knowledge and education as information. So-called 'continuous' assessment involves assessments at relatively frequent intervals that may split a subject into discrete parts. As well, more complicated regimes of assessment became more common, and these generally have had more assessments. More assessment is attractive to the new culture, because assessment is tangible, and can be measured concretely. By identifying something that is tangible although peripheral to the actual quality of teaching, with the quality of teaching itself, a complex assessment regime provides apparent evidence of innovative and high quality teaching, and of 'student centred learning'. In fact, it is intrinsic to teaching that its actual quality is intangible so that

there is an intrinsic conceptual and practical resistance to making of quality a tangible and measurable notion.<sup>9,10,11</sup> The quality of teaching and education relates neither simply to procedures nor to information acquired, but to the individual internal *experience* of the student – and although student surveys may yield useful information, ultimately this is a matter for judgement, not measurement.

Whatever one thinks on these matters, imposed requirements and complex assessment regimes do, in many subjects, create treadmills of assessment and great strains upon students and staff, but there is no official concern and little awareness of the effects. The idea of helping a much more diverse body of students pass their exams by having frequent assessments may well have had a certain success, but it has been achieved at the cost of narrowing the concept, perception and experience of education, of blurring the distinction between university and school, of perceiving education primarily as training and information acquisition, and of placing lesser emphasis on student independence.

An irony in this situation is that the perceived need for more assessments shows a lack of confidence in the students, and fails to provide them with an environment that encourages them to become ‘independent learners’, an often-stated objective. Learning and education in a fuller sense mean that students need time to reflect, to contemplate, to analyse, to explore, and to unify their ideas. Instead of this, there is imposed a continual round of busyness and assessments, as learning is reduced to bits and the acquisition of technical skills. The above issues relate also to common pressures on education in schools, and a response to the latter has been well and movingly expressed by G. J. Stroud, a former primary school teacher:

Apparently I'm more valuable as an assessor, an examiner, a data collector: I have to dull my once-engaging lesson sequences. Now I must begin by planning the assessment, consider how students will show what they've learnt and pre-determine what they are going to learn .... it is mechanical and rigid and driven....This testing costs me dearly -- it costs me time with my learners, it costs my energy, it costs me the trust of my students. But it's costing Australia too -- the price of our young minds and their desire to learn.<sup>12</sup>

A further force in the attitudes to university education is technology. Students now are likely to attend lectures much less frequently, and take lecture material from their university's website (which as well as printed material often includes video recordings of lectures), or from a multitude of on-line sources. Again, the effect is to fragment learning, and to reduce it to information -- the individual characteristics and intellectual personality of the lecturer, and what the lecturer can bring to a student's learning, are lost. Over time, technology may be able to provide a learning that is more of an education, but it seems more likely that it will reinforce the dominant notion of learning as information acquisition.

Other factors affecting attitudes to knowledge have been liberal economics and postmodernism. Under the dominating ideas of a type of liberal economics in public policy, which I shall call market economics, all services, including education, are regarded as only supplied according to market demand. This is reflected, for example, in the view that students are no more than customers or clients. The underlying assumptions of market economics and its implicit view of society received little critical examination. In fact, at times, market economics seemed to be a quasi-religious faith in the infallible wisdom of markets and an invariably benign ‘invisible hand’.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, this view of how best society should operate was presented as a self-evident truth, and it affected the way universities understood themselves and their relationship to society -- universities used a commercial and business language to describe their activities and their concept of themselves. Consequently, there were

effects on the universities' attitude to knowledge, as tangible areas of study with a more direct and immediate relationship with wider society became more valued, while less tangible areas were devalued. This was, of course, in line with the thinking in the White Paper -- within the universities, the policy ideas of the White Paper and market economics interacted with and reinforced each other. The idea of the market, when transferred to institutions traditionally associated with disinterested knowledge and truth, now turned knowledge and truth into commodities to be valued by a market. This process has a certain subtlety, and acts indirectly by changing the internal language of discourse and imposing continual management change.

More or less concurrently, postmodernism became very influential in the humanities and social sciences, and looked upon knowledge and truth as proxies for power, while at the same time regarding a group which asserts a certain agreed-upon narrative as creating its own truths. In this view, truths are essentially no more than social constructions -- that is, truths are social beliefs rather than knowledge, and may be derived from individual or group interest, history, or tradition. On the one hand, if a more powerful group asserts truths, within this thinking such truths are likely to be regarded as illegitimate assertions of power, and purported knowledge a front for a hidden purpose of oppression. Thus, whereas at one time, truth was regarded as a way of challenging power, now, to the postmodern mind, it became a manifestation of it. On the other hand, truths asserted by a less powerful group are more likely to be regarded as valid and their truths as legitimate dissent. In either case, under the postmodern approach, truth becomes socially constructed, relative and political. This re-orientates our concepts of knowledge and truth which, traditionally, were considered as standing outside individuals and groups. Nevertheless, and unavoidably, the need to validate the legitimacy of one body of relative 'truth' against that of another persisted (as it still does), but such validation is impossible when the possibility of over-arching judgment or agreement has been denied. This created both an epistemological and practical *impasse* for postmodernism, since a statement subsequent to the idea that truth is relative cannot rationally claim the authority of a wider truth. It is arguable that a reason for the waning of postmodern ideas in the humanities and social sciences is a perception that because they negate themselves, they are not an effective means to achieve change in society.<sup>14</sup>

In any case, whether one supports the near-universal applicability of market economics, or whether one is some type of quasi-Marxist postmodernist, over-arching intellectual judgments are suspended as knowledge and truth are both commercialised and politicised, and diminished either to market values, or to a suspected form of oppression. The potential moral import of learning and the attainment of knowledge is removed, as the latter are diluted and become subservient to commerce and power.

In some areas of the humanities and social science, one can receive the impression that academic work and the pursuit of truth are now regarded as secondary to social aims. At the same time, under market economics the values and language universities use conform to government policy and the commercial culture to which they have no longer an imaginable alternative. The broader danger is that history, truth and practicalities of implementation cannot be accepted for what they are, but must be made to conform to pre-determined ideologies and presumed worthy ends. Consequently, the actual solution of problems is rendered more difficult, as resolution of them depends upon seeing things more from a distance, and as they are. But if knowledge is no more than relative, and only validated by a group having a certain agreed or imposed view that is not open to challenge, knowledge no longer exists, and universities cease to have any value.

Given the above, it is not surprising that the perceived value of scholarship also has been greatly affected by the new culture. In line with the notion that a university is a business, universities place great importance on auditing individual performance and measuring outcomes, accompanied by a 'tick the box' mentality. This mentality recognises only activities that are tangible, easily measured, and that are frequently directed to meeting the criteria of the international ranking tables. Consequently, intangible activities are devalued. Thus, concerning scholarship, Belinda Probert writes:

....there is little evidence that the terms 'scholar' and 'scholarship' are used easily within Australian universities to describe distinctive values or qualities. ....Newer higher education providers find it difficult to excite their teachers about its relevance.<sup>15</sup>

The situation is further confused as 'scholarship' is now being used as a way to legitimise teaching in comparison with research. The 'scholarship of teaching' often now refers to research into teaching practice. In this way of thinking, good teaching is re-defined as a type of research, and we reach a ridiculous conclusion -- namely, teaching is to be seen as being as valuable as research because it *is* research. That is what happens when intangible and qualitative notions (in this case good teaching and scholarship), are artificially forced into quantitative categories (in this case the number of research publications). Scholarship as traditionally understood, and other vital but intangible notions, have no place in this type of thinking.

The nature and potential of scholarship in the old sense can perhaps be illustrated by looking at an example. C. S. Lewis' book 'The Discarded Image'<sup>16</sup>, on the passing of the Aristotelian and medieval conceptions of the world and the universe, is at once a description based on wide erudition, a balancing of differing viewpoints, and a synthesis and integration of the many ideas of the nature of the heavens up to the end of the medieval period. However, and above all (and this is only possible because of the preceding qualities), it is a reconstruction and participation of great imagination and warmth of the people, minds and times within its historical purview. It provides a means not only of thinking about the past, but about ourselves, posing, as Lewis does, the general question of how beliefs and cultural attitudes in any time come to be discarded, or embraced. It reminds us that change involves loss, whatever might be gained. And yet, it is precisely that loss that can enable the past to shed light upon the present and enable us to see it more clearly.

The fuller idea of scholarship carries within it notions of trying to integrate knowledge, understand the whole, see things in perspective, and calls upon the whole person to make intellectual, disinterested and humane judgments. It nearly always involves some sort of historical awareness, the lack of which is a characteristic of our culture, to which Steiner has alluded in a literary context as a 'dimming of recognitions'<sup>17</sup>. Scholarship may take different forms but, ideally, it involves the whole person and has a greater breadth that is not necessarily required in research, because research can be narrow and specialised – and this is even necessary in more technical research. The new culture values research because it is considered to be measurable by research publications, and this is the most significant factor, overall, in international university rankings. But the qualities of scholarship, seen from within the present culture, are vague, not directed to specific and tangible ends, lacking in discernible economic benefits, and so are of questionable merit.

Related to all of these matters is our concept of education. In the older sense, education is intangible and organic, in that it extends beyond the acquisition of specific facts, information, training and techniques and cannot be reduced to a mere combination of these. But education is now thought of as a machine, each part of

which carries out a specific, tangible task, the collection of which tasks supposedly will produce an inevitable and pre-determined result -- it's seen simply as a matter of getting the tasks and procedures right, with the overall process being called 'quality assurance'.

Under the culture of relentless auditing, frequent assessments, and performance evaluation, what is intangible is ignored at best and dismissed at worst. Thus, education is now conflated with assessment, adherence to procedures, the acquisition of specific information, technical skills and enthusiasm for change and approved attitudes. Education is now in danger of becoming no more than its associated epiphenomena. This is a type of reductionism, and is epitomised by the 'tick the box' mentality that, Facebook-like, encourages our response to complex issues to be 'like' or 'dislike' as the only possibilities.

### **Language, marketing and management in higher education**

In the older culture, universities did not conceive of themselves as businesses but rather as cultural and intellectual institutions. Universities then did not have the problem of 'promoting' themselves, as they do today. In accordance with their new conception of themselves as businesses, and as a means of indicating conformity with government policy, language in universities now is often little more than a marketing and promotional tool. The use of language continually to assure, to promote and to place all activities in a positive light, is misleading at best and dishonest at worst. It induces a numbing conformity, and prevents the open discussion of problems. As in George Orwell's 'Newspeak', it narrows the range of thought, and that is one of its implicit purposes.

A common technique for manipulating language is to use phrases that are 'non-contestable' and so conformity with them becomes obligatory. For example, 'best practice' has been a phrase very popular in universities -- the use of the word 'best' implies that the phrase is non-contestable. In fact, 'best practice' is mostly a vacuous concept because there is no agreed 'best', and this is especially the case in education and teaching. Use of this phrase implies that shared agreement is not only possible but obligatory, and so enforces conformity. Another example is 'quality assurance', which is non-contestable because it supposedly *assures* quality. Of course, 'quality assurance' does not refer to actual quality, but to *procedures* that are peripheral to quality itself, although it is found generally useful to conflate the two. These are examples where language is used to induce conformity, but also for an attempted grandiose effect. This striving for 'grandiosity' permeates universities, but also our wider culture, as analysed in detail by Alvesson.<sup>18</sup>

'Innovation' is also a highly regarded word in universities, and it has the broadest meaning possible -- that is, it encompasses any sort of change, and is regarded as an automatic good. This means that there is pressure to acquiesce in change whatever it might be. The word 'innovation' often functions as yet another attempt at grandiosity and its overuse creates expectations on individuals to demonstrate their willingness to innovate regardless of circumstances, and so puts pressure on them to conform to a particular management philosophy. In any case, plenty of innovations in universities have a short life and are not thoroughly tested or implemented, conveniently leaving space for the next innovation. As well, the repetitive use of a single word reduces the value of the word when it is used legitimately. Other examples of some words and phrases used in a similarly manipulative way over the years are: 'world class', 'education industry',



‘transparency’, ‘accountability’, ‘leadership’, ‘flagship courses’, ‘student-centred learning’, ‘branding’ and ‘continuous improvement’.

Another notable language use has been to refer to students as ‘customers’ or ‘clients’. The use of the former goes back to the early days after the White Paper, and its use was defended by some on the basis that it would force academics to take a more responsible attitude to their teaching. However, the commercial connotation of ‘customer’ and ‘client’ promotes a different notion of the relationship between academics as teachers, and students. The phrase ‘teacher and student’ suggests a positive mutuality of relationship, even a potential partnership, whereas a customer merely pays for a service in a business transaction. The use of ‘customer’ distorts what should be the relationship between the teacher and the student, and narrows conceptions of what that relationship might be. Of course, that is what it was intended also to do. But while it was a legitimate grievance against the old culture, that all too often academics had little concern for students' interests and their teaching was given with a ‘take it or leave it’ attitude, distorting language in this way was neither a desirable nor a necessary way to deal with the issue.

An effect of regarding students as customers is that ‘customer’ expectations should be met. However, to varying degrees, university students set their expectations by past experience, without an awareness that one's conceptions and experience may be limited and restrictive. So, if meeting the expectations of students as customers takes precedence over presenting challenging new ideas and experiences, students' education will be more limited, less interesting, and of lesser benefit to students than it might have been.

Discussion concerning universities is often confused, in part due to the artificiality of the dominant language, and the indiscriminate use of words and phrases without regard to details or context. The language, its content and its intent then become opaque, greatly adding to the difficulty in discussing issues. More generally, our society and public debate also are affected also by the quality of language, and one might argue that universities are simply taking the practice of wider society as validating their own use of language.<sup>19</sup>

In a recent paper, Belinda Probert draws attention to consequences of the gap between the language used in relation to ‘quality’ and the reaction of many academics to it as being irrelevant to their actual work as teachers and researchers.<sup>20</sup> There is also a view that the opaque language used in university documents has led to an external lack of confidence and lack of trust.<sup>21</sup> In 1979 the American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch wrote:

Mass education, which began as a promising attempt to democratise the higher culture of the privileged classes, has ended by stupefying the privileged themselves. Modern society has achieved unprecedented rates of formal literacy, but at the same time it has produced new forms of illiteracy.<sup>22</sup>

Essentially, that is what happened in universities following the White Paper. The marketing culture within universities now promotes a new form of illiteracy, as universities use a language that manipulates while giving itself intellectual pretensions, obfuscates instead of clarifying, relies on slogans and not thought, strives continually to impress, and avoids discussion of issues.

One difficulty in university management is that major issues cannot be separated from each other, and yet within universities policy is often introduced with a single objective in mind, without regard to wider effects. This might be termed a reductionist philosophy of management, as opposed to one that is organic. This is an effect of the adoption in management theory (so it is imagined) of the positivist approach to knowledge found in science, without regard to its appropriateness or

legitimacy in a different context. This manifests itself in the crudity of the auditing culture with its 'tick the box' mentality and its exclusion of the intangible.

A further consequence of frequent assessments for large classes is that the effort of administration increases dramatically, as subject coordinators must answer many emails concerning queries on subject tutorials and examination procedures, applications for assessments or examinations missed through illness or personal circumstances, and make arrangements for those assessments to be carried out (levels of support for such tasks can vary greatly within universities). Nearly all of this is clerical work carried out, in plenty of cases, by both senior and junior academics. As Coaldrake and Stedman say:

...within universities there is chronic discontent with constraints on time and resources, and dissatisfaction with management. Strains are evident in traditional academic cultures with increasing work pressures, more intrusive regulation by government and close involvement with the world of commerce, as well as diversification of roles and disparities in rewards ... it is far too simplistic to assume that the traditional academic workload breakdown of 40 per cent teaching, 40 percent research and 20 per cent service applies across all academics and all universities ..... In reality, there is enormous variation within and among universities in the balance and intensity of various aspects of academic work.<sup>23</sup>

However, despite such clearly-identified problems, it is part of the new culture that the trivialisation of academic work is not a matter of concern. Rather, such problems are simply ignored, and new procedures are constantly introduced in addition to existing ones in the name of 'innovation' and 'quality assurance'.

For those academics involved, the time spent on coordinating a subject may detract markedly from the quality of teaching, especially in an under-resourced environment. The underlying attitude seems to be: 'teaching goes ahead as matter of course, but what is really important is setting your aims, goals, objectives, outcomes and procedures, writing them out in detail, and meeting the assessment and reporting requirements set by management'. These and such procedures are called 'quality assurance' and, within the new culture, the extent to which they are met is often implicitly held to display actual teaching quality.

### **Wider considerations and conclusion**

As mentioned earlier, the book by C. S. Lewis, 'The Discarded Image', was about the passing of the medieval world view. But just as the medieval view was discarded, in our own times older conceptions of 'The University' likewise have been discarded. Lewis points out that the different languages used to describe the old medieval view and the new scientific view were metaphorical, and writes:

The old language continually suggests a sort of continuity between purely physical events and our most spiritual aspirations.<sup>24</sup>

The new scientific language omitted a transcending spiritual dimension, and broke the link between physical events and a spiritual awareness. In this sense, the scientific language was a step in the direction of modern secularism.<sup>25</sup>

But at the same time, the new scientific outlook accepted a transcendent realm - that of knowledge, truth and the effectiveness of the intellect. This is what Coaldrake and Stedman refer to in a more secular sense as 'a universal framework for understanding'<sup>26</sup>. It was an implicit perception of a transcendent realm of knowledge and truth that was, perhaps, the single most defining characteristic of the old university culture.

In our own times, there has been a corresponding change in language as the older idea of a university has been discarded, with the new language in universities being emotionally and intellectually limited, purely utilitarian, and displaying little or no historical awareness. The scientific revolution in the seventeenth century greatly

diminished the identification of the transcendent with a personal and omnipotent God, and secularised the transcendent by removing it to a colder and more remote place of stricter knowledge and intellect, although that place remained accessible to a secular affirmation, and even to a religious affirmation of a less personal kind. In our own times the possibility of even that secular affirmation is itself being removed, by encroaching market economics and materialism on the one hand, and by scepticism and relativism on the other. The consequent loss of a sense of higher purpose produces the cultural emptiness in society and the limited aims that pervade higher education today. Of course, in this, universities are mimicking wider society but, at one time, it was thought to be a role of universities to question and draw attention to alternative ways of thinking about society. However, the collapse of what one could term the 'high culture' of universities has far deeper roots than the narrowing of educational intent in a local event such as the publication of the White Paper. The difficulty arises from changing cultural attitudes in wider society and the fact that there is no purely secular basis that validates the disinterested life of the mind. This is expressed by George Steiner:

The thrust of will which engenders art and disinterested thought, the engaged response which alone can ensure its transmission to other human beings, to the future, are rooted in a gamble on transcendence.<sup>27</sup>

That 'gamble on transcendence', as Steiner puts it is, indeed, a gamble, and has little purchase in our current world of immediacy, material values, and simplistic responses. Nevertheless, the 'gamble on transcendence' permeates science itself, and was recognised by Isaac Newton when, in his 'Rules of Reasoning in Philosophy' he wrote:

...nor are we to recede from the analogy of Nature, which is...always consonant with itself.<sup>28</sup>

This rule of reasoning of Newton's is not subject to logical demonstration, but rather is based on custom and necessity. As well, Bertrand Russell says:

...logical knowledge is not derivable from experience alone.<sup>29</sup>

Looked at another way, Russell is saying that knowledge derived only from experience has an element of incompleteness. The views of Newton and Russell point to the transcendent foundations of scientific knowledge, in the sense that those foundations are not fully accessible to reason, and so require a type of acceptance and belief lying beyond reason. This neither implies that such acceptance is unjustified, nor that all belief is on the same level.

In the declining perception of common, transcending values, public discourse and policy are being reduced to market values, whereby opinion poses as knowledge and is designed to appeal to a group of the like-minded -- in effect, that is an aspect of the wider message of market economics, and it produces an attitude of relativism. Thus, the wider message of market economics has practical epistemological consequences, for there is little market for truth in modern capitalism. But as well, and coming from a completely different perspective, the postmodern idea that claims to knowledge are spurious and in any case are little more than exercises in power also confirms the relativist outlook, and we have the irony that the so-called 'left' and 'right' have much in common. Under combined assaults, words, reason, intangible qualities and the concept of truth are losing their purchase and force of persuasion. There is a consequent cultural emptiness in our society which, in education, in the management of organisations, in public discussion, and in wider culture is discussed variously by Alvesson<sup>30</sup>, Alvesson and Spicer<sup>31</sup>, Bloom<sup>32</sup>, Collini<sup>33</sup>, Connell<sup>34</sup>, Enzenberger<sup>35</sup>, Gare<sup>36</sup>, Lasch<sup>37</sup>, Lewis<sup>38</sup>, Nilsen<sup>39</sup>, Saunders<sup>40</sup>, Steiner<sup>41</sup>, Vargas Llosa<sup>42</sup>, Sokal and Bricmont<sup>43</sup>, Vinsel and Russell<sup>44</sup>, When<sup>45</sup>, and others.

In the old educational culture little was said but much implied, while in the new much is said but little implied. In the old culture, an academic's loyalty was felt to lie beyond the employing institution. In the new, an academic's loyalty is expected to belong to the employing university as a business. This does not absolutely deny academic freedom, but it severely diminishes it. It was a weakness of the old culture that it could not articulate a higher sense of the worth of education and knowledge, without which education simply becomes training and the acquisition of facts and information. This meant that under a delayed, unprecedented assault, the weakness of the old culture could not withstand the new, and little attempt was made to resist the ideas in the government's new policies of 1988. In any case, change was necessary, as technology was creating a more complex society, 'globalisation' was raising the bar in international economic competitiveness, and employability required more advanced knowledge and skills. In such circumstances, an increase in student numbers, changes in the composition of the student body, and a greater general participation of people in higher education were inevitable. What was not inevitable was the manipulation of language, the uninformed management practices, and the new attitudes to teaching, to research, and to academic staff that occurred -- these now are regarded implicitly as inseparable from the basic functions of universities, creating layers of sameness and conformity. The marketing mentality now dominates universities outside of its legitimate domain, in much the same way as it dominates wider society. The new culture typically protects itself against description and analysis on the basis that any critical analysis can only be due to the critic's resistance to change and nostalgia for a defunct culture. This is simplistic but convenient nonsense. The fact that there were serious problems in the old culture provides no reason whatsoever to ignore the description, analysis and problems of the new.

Despite the magnitude of the changes in educational culture and the dominance of academic life by management, academics generally have carried out their teaching well in demanding circumstances. There remains good reason to think that education intrinsically resists the notion that it is a mere commodity<sup>46</sup> and that it may resist, even for some time, the forces that act to limit it. The future of universities remains uncertain, the older vision of knowledge and intellectual endeavour has collapsed, and there is no going back to an imagined ideal academic world. However, one can hope that the new may show sufficient awareness of the better parts of the old so that, from time to time, it may respond to its own imaginative and practical limitations. One might say, with Tennyson's Ulysses: 'Tho' much is taken, much abides.'

*Acknowledgement and author's postscript:* The author is indebted to the referee for making a number of suggestions that have helped to clarify aspects of this paper. As well, the referee commented: 'The discussion of liberal economics and postmodernism is relevant to the new 'post-truth' world and can be seen to be evidence that post-truth is not something new, but just the inevitable development of those forces.' The author agrees. The 'post-truth' world has been latent and developing for some decades, although more widely recognised only recently.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dawkins, *Higher Education: a policy statement*, circulated by the Hon. J. S. Dawkins MP, Minister for Employment, Education and Training. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dawkins, *Higher Education: a policy statement*, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> P. Coaldrake and L. Stedman, *Raising The Stakes: gambling with the future of universities*, University of Queensland Press, 2016 (originally published 2013), p. 35. This work has a tendency to 'go with the flow', but it is realistic and informed and, although not pursued, it reveals an awareness of what actually happens *inside* universities. The latter hardly comes within the purview of many university commentators and writings about universities.

<sup>4</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Frank M. Turner Ed.), Yale University Press, 1996 (originally published 1899).

<sup>5</sup> See C. Pyne, 'The return of the Menzies tradition in higher education', *Quadrant*, May, 2014. Informative as this article is about the nature of universities and higher education policy in the later Menzies period, it is naive in imagining an easy return to that earlier period, showing little awareness of the changed culture and the commercialisation of universities.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Gaita, 'To Civilise the City?', *Meanjin* 71, 2012, and G. Davis, 'The Australian Idea of a University', *Meanjin*, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> In a subject like mathematics, which depends upon a strict logical development based upon prior knowledge, the removal of prerequisites has been disastrous, contributing to the current concern over what are called the STEM subjects. Thinking of knowledge as a commodity takes no account of the intellectual structure within different areas of knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics* had long ago drawn attention to the natures of different areas of knowledge, but policy makers preferred a single rule or slogan that applies or appeals to all, and they are in any case ill-equipped and uninterested in dealing with intellectual distinctions and differing circumstances.

<sup>9</sup> B. Probert, *The Quality of Australia's Higher Education System: how it might be defined, improved and assured*, Office of Learning and Teaching, Australian Government, discussion paper 4, 2014, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hare, 'No prizes for promoting teaching quality: Probert', *The Australian*, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Of course the words 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' have different meanings. One might regard the attempt to reduce the former to the latter as directed to changing the meaning of a word, or to render it unnecessary. Once 'quality' is replaced by 'quantity', the essence of the word 'quality' has been eliminated.

<sup>12</sup> G. J. Stroud, 'Teaching Australia', *Griffith Review 51: Fixing the System*, pp. 1-9.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase is Adam Smith's, mentioned in his seminal work *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776.

<sup>14</sup> Note also the comment of Alan Ryan in 'Princeton diary', *London Review of Books*, March 1992: 'Once you read Foucault as saying that truth is simply an effect of power, you've had it. Those with power have "truth" on their side, and the old radical hope that we can undermine power with truth is incoherent.'

<sup>15</sup> B. Probert, *Why Scholarship Matters in Higher Education*, Office for Learning and Teaching Discussion Paper 2, Australian Government, May 2014, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: an introduction to medieval and renaissance literature*, Cambridge, 2012 (10th printing, originally published 1964).

<sup>17</sup> G. Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: some notes towards the redefinition of culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1971, p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> M. Alvesson, *The Triumph of Emptiness: consumption, higher education and work organisation*, OUP, Oxford, 2013, pp. 8-14.

<sup>19</sup> See D. Watson, *Death Sentence*, Knopf, 2003, for a discussion of language trends and misuse in an Australian context, as well as Watson's later books.

<sup>20</sup> B. Probert, *The Quality of Australia's Higher Education System*, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> B. Probert, *The Quality of Australia's Higher Education System*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American life in an age of reduced expectations*, Norton, New York, 1991 (originally published in 1979), p.127.

<sup>23</sup> P. Coaldrake and L. Stedman, *Raising The Stakes*, pp. 84-89 and pp. 100-102.

<sup>24</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>25</sup> On the social and cultural gains and losses consequent upon seventeenth century science, see also C. Hill, *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1980, especially pp. 58-59, 65-67.

<sup>26</sup> See P. Coaldrake and L. Stedman, *Raising The Stakes*, pp. 24-26.

<sup>27</sup> G. Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, p. 89.

<sup>28</sup> I. Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, 1687, translated as *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* by Andrew Motte, Daniel Adee, New York, 1846 (first American edition), p. 384 (from Rule III in the 'Rules of Reasoning in Philosophy'). Newton's principle of the 'consonance of Nature with itself' is fundamental to scientific knowledge, as it underlies the derivation of a general physical behaviour from only particular observations of that behaviour. The principle lies beyond logical demonstration and, in this sense, it is ent but not strictly rational.

<sup>29</sup> B. Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2009 (originally published 1914), p. 30, but see also pp. 26-30.

- <sup>30</sup> M. Alvesson, *The Triumph of Emptiness*.
- <sup>31</sup> M. Alvesson and A. Spicer, *The Stupidity Paradox: the power and pitfalls of functional stupidity at work*, Profile Books, London, 2016.
- <sup>32</sup> A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987.
- <sup>33</sup> S. Collini, “Who are the spongers now?”, *London Review of Books*, 38 (2), 2016, pp. 33-37.
- <sup>34</sup> R. Connell, *MyUniversity: Notes on neoliberalism and knowledge for the consideration of the Academic Board*, submission to the Academic Board, Sydney University, May, 2012.
- <sup>35</sup> H. Magnus Enzensberger, ‘The industrialisation of the mind’, in *Critical Essays*, Continuum, New York, 1982, pp. 3-14.
- <sup>36</sup> S. Gare, *The Triumph of the Airheads: the retreat from commonsense*, Park Street Press and Media 21, Sydney, 2006.
- <sup>37</sup> C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*.
- <sup>38</sup> H. R. Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul: How a great university forgot education*, Public Affairs, 2006.
- <sup>39</sup> R. Nillsen, Don’t do what Australia has done, *Quadrant*, November, 2004.
- <sup>40</sup> M. Saunders, The madness and malady of managerialism, *Quadrant*, March, 2006.
- <sup>41</sup> G. Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*.
- <sup>42</sup> M. Vargas Llosa *Notes on the Death of Culture: essays on spectacle and society*, Faber, London (2015) (Originally published in Spanish in 2012).
- <sup>43</sup> A. Sokal and J. Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures*, Profile Books, London 1998.
- <sup>44</sup> L. Vinsel and A. Russell, ‘Silicon folly’, *The Saturday Paper*, August 27-September 2, 2016, p. 7.
- <sup>45</sup> F. Wheen, *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: a short history of modern delusions*, Harper Perennial, London, 2004.
- <sup>46</sup> S. Marginson, ‘The limits of market reform in higher education’, *Higher Education Forum*, 7 March, 2009, pp. 1-19. Research Institute for Higher Education, Hiroshima University.

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