

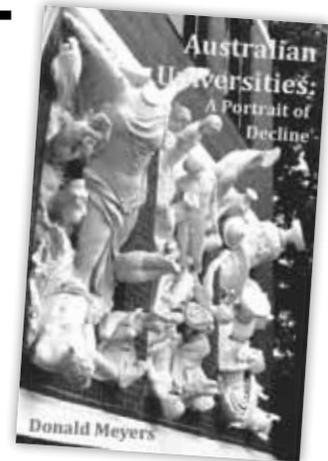
FAILING BY DEGREES

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES: A PORTRAIT OF DECLINE

Philippa Martyr looks at some of the absurdities and perversities of Australian universities as described by Donald Meyers

By Donald Meyers

www.australianuniversities.id.au, 2012
free PDF download, 169 pages
ISBN 9780646577746



What would an Australian education system look like if it were run in the same way that we ran our national sports training?

Let's say coaches in various academic disciplines visit schools regularly, looking for that top percentile of the population with specialised talents or potential. These children are identified early and given extra support to develop their skills. Then as their real potential emerges, we start training them at an elite institution. It is hard work and involves sacrifices, early mornings, and sometimes frustration and weariness for all involved. But the young adults discover in themselves an amazing capacity for excellence and achievement, for which there are handsome rewards—both socially and financially. We make it worth their while to be trained, and once they're qualified we release them to compete with other highly trained individuals.

This is how Australia creates its medal-winners at sporting events. Unfortunately, after having soaked up a small fortune, players tend to burn out, often in their mid-20s. For reasons I am yet to fathom—hating as I do most forms of sport—all this is considered worth it. But wouldn't it be a good idea to use the same system to produce lifelong achievers like engineers, doctors, architects, physicists, archaeologists and geologists?

Why on earth are we 'investing' millions in a handful of elite athletes while destroying the education system that could equip thousands for productive and happy lives, and strengthen our economy?

That's exactly what Donald Meyers, author of the free e-book *Australian Universities: A Portrait of Decline*, thinks—and I agree with him. We seem unable to apply sports training principles to our education system for mainly two reasons.

- Ideological infestation of the primary and secondary teacher training system (through colleges of advanced education and then universities) with 'teaching' methods that don't work, either as classroom disciplines or pedagogy
- strong support for this from teachers' unions from the 1970s—the decade in which they clearly still feel the most comfortable.

Rinse and repeat. In the case of the Australian education system, this cycle has been running now for two generations. This explains why

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your child's school report has more spelling and grammatical mistakes than your child's homework, and why your child can urge you to quit smoking and vote Greens but cannot recite the times tables. When ideology replaces excellence—or worse, becomes interchangeable with the term 'excellence'—the results can be easily measured, notwithstanding the scandalous rejection in 2010 of the NAPLAN tests by various teachers' unions in Australia as a benchmark of basic competence.¹

Australian Universities faces this educational crisis squarely and honestly. Sadly, everything in it rings true, and it's a book that I—and at least 10 other people I can think of—could have easily written. Why haven't we done so? I can't speak for the others, but my version of Meyers' book would have been full of outrageous, unflattering and potentially libellous anecdotes. His is only marginally so, and is well-argued and restrained, even though he admits in his acknowledgements that he got a lot of information from people who would rather not be named.

Meyers' book has eight chapters, and he's gone for the kill in all of them. The essence of the first three chapters is that administration and bureaucracy have—thanks to the Dawkins 'reforms' of the 1980s—invaded Australian universities and swollen to gigantic proportions. This has choked off teaching and research, and turned them into appendages feeding the administrative behemoth. Academics of practically every political persuasion would agree that this is true; there is a bit of an ivory tower in most of us (even one beloved old lefty chum who read Meyers' book at my request and told me that although he agreed, it was a bit 'elitist' for his taste). Deep down, most genuine academics would like to be left alone to get on with what they love doing, are good at doing, and got into the business to do in the first place.

By dishonestly using the concepts of 'demand-driven' higher education catering to the 'market,' universities are now allowed to enrol as many students as they can cram into the buildings under OH&S regulations, and then do what they like with the students as long as a sufficient percentage of them pass every year. In fact, Meyers shows quite neatly in his first chapter

that the business of investigating Australian universities is a profitable industry in its own right, with no fewer than 23 ongoing investigations. Get on that bandwagon, and you'll be busy for the rest of your life.

I can't imagine a single university press touching *Australian Universities* with a bargepole, but there is great freedom in publishing electronically, as Meyers has done, either through websites such as www.lulu.com or in PDF form. How liberating it is to read an academic saying exactly what he thinks—and how delighted I was to encounter the Seagull School of Management as practised by university bureaucrats.

They fly in out of nowhere, start immediately to behave aggressively toward everyone around them, consume resources at a prodigious pace, shit everywhere and then fly off at short notice, leaving others to clean up their excrement. (p. 19)

Chapter 2 is a cracker, giving a good broad historical introduction to the funding of Australian universities and the Dawkins 'reform' process, wherein universities became corporations vying for 'customers.'

Students, by virtue of their spending power, which was in reality the right to go into debt to pay for their education, would become the masters of the academics, who would have to give the customer what they wanted or lose their jobs when the institutions drowned in red ink due to a lack of paying customers. (p. 25)

So how did the ivory tower turn into a football stadium? If you need bums on seats, how do you get enough of them to pay your overheads?

Meyers shows you how. First of all you have to lower your entry standards, but you can't just come out and say that. You have to say things like 'broadening' or 'opening up new opportunities' or 'accessing a fresh demographic.' These are nice ways of saying that people who can barely read or write should be admitted to courses like nursing, where they can be supported at huge expense,

time and effort for three years, and then be found underprepared for the workplace.

At this point, these disgruntled students sometimes go to tribunals, usually at someone else's expense and with righteous indignation. Many academics would have experienced this kind of manipulation from people who are permanently aggrieved and seem to think that litigation skills are a good substitute for education. On the other hand, these students have a point: They are now three years into debt when they should have been counselled out of the course in its first months.

So you've got your increased numbers, but that means your university teaching staff are now facing individual classes of 30 instead of 10. You now need to employ more staff while making sure they're casuals or on short-term contracts. There is a huge pool of PhD graduates longing for a piece of the academic action thinking (erroneously) that once they have a foot inside the door, the next full-time appointment will be theirs. There must be dozens of bitterly disappointed would-be academics who have watched the few lectureships go to expensive imports, employed on the strength of a soon-to-be-published doctoral thesis that may bring in coveted publications funding, or because they may have a track record of making successful grant applications. (Anecdotes suggest these expensive imports usually turn out to be either bone idle or in the middle of life crises, so they spend their first year on stress leave, their second in court with their employer, and their third looking for another job.)

Anyway, in come the happy hordes of new students, and all is at first tickety-boo. But they begin to fail too often, because it turns out that academically substandard students fail the type of university courses you've been running so far. So you make the courses easier to pass by 'moderating' your marking with the rest of the teaching team, so that everyone is grading on a nice curve and everything looks normal. The curve has in fact shifted to one side, but it still looks the same from the outside, which is all that matters.

The next step is to introduce new courses and units that specifically cater to this new demographic. These are 'broadening' or easy,

undemanding whistles-and-bells courses that cater to a generation of ever-dwindling attention spans. New technologies are the tools of this change in course delivery—if we put it on a screen, students will look at it, no matter what it is. The courses are easy to pass, the students will pass them in greater and greater numbers, pop out of the Pink Floyd-esque sausage grinder with token degrees, and no one will be any the wiser. Literally.

He who pays the piper calls the tune. The instant you hold your hand out for government money, you are signing up for bureaucracy, interference and surveillance. Everyone knows this, and the universities are no exception—good grief, haven't these people read *Faust*? As if by magic, a class of employees emerges whose sole purpose is to ensure their university extracts every last cent it can from the system. The only mildly surprising thing is that universities have been allowed to self-regulate—they create easily met artificial standards (Graduate Attributes, anyone?) and then tell the government these are accurate reflections of their business. It's rather like filling in dole forms with details of imaginary job applications—it doesn't mean anything, but it keeps the money coming in.

This kind of *legerdemain* sneaks into every aspect of university life, and there is none more profitable than the full-fee-paying area. Why mess around with complex funding systems when you can simply take the cash up front? It's nice to see free-market principles alive and well at Curtin University, where 12 people were charged earlier this year when a staff member took bribes to alter overseas students' English language grades.² Universities actively battle with one another other to recruit students from every corner of the globe—China is a large and obvious target, and at one stage I found that a local university's in-house glossy magazine read like *China Reconstructs*. No potential market is too crazy: Sudan, Iraq, Mongolia, lost Amazonian tribes, and if shower mould could be enrolled on full fees, universities would offer degrees in Contemporary Bathroom Fittings.

And of course these potential students—and the local agencies that find them in countries where bribery is factored into the cost of carrying out even the most trivial administrative

function—have to be, and are, promised everything. Overstaying on a student visa becomes an option,³ so in effect the higher education system can become an elaborate and comfortable form of people-smuggling. Meanwhile, the oblivious Australian taxpayer continues to pay, and pay, and pay.

There are also subtler kinds of fraud. For example, you can actively pursue and retain masters and doctoral students in large numbers—too many for one person to supervise, of course, but as long as you can retain them, your institution receives the funding. Doctoral students can be worth a small fortune to an Australian university by the time they complete their degree. Students are accepted into graduate programs (and retained) even when they show clear signs of not being able to complete their doctorate. Pressure can be—and is—then placed by the university on the students' supervisors, who then covertly write/complete the doctorate for the student.

I can't prove any of this, of course, and like Meyers I'm trying to make sure no one can be identified or sued. There is very little research on this kind of rotting and corruption because the universities themselves make it as difficult as possible to get hold of the information (pp. 62–63). This is one of the most painful ironies of the disintegration of the university—*institutions once devoted to freedom of thought, investigation, inquiry and expression are now monoliths of silence, intrigue, threats, reprimands, mysterious disappearances, and intellectual dishonesty.*

So you are left (like Meyers) to collect stories over lunch at the local pub, conferences, study days, or workshops. It's like a secret society—all it takes is one knowing remark, one off-hand glance, a raised eyebrow, or a meaningful silence, and you know you have met a fellow sufferer. A glass of wine later, out it all comes. The ex-academics are usually the most frank, and the more recently ex they are, the better and more up to date the quality of their anecdotes.

Here are some of mine: I taught in a department in the 1990s that was in considerable debt, and had recently undergone a staff re-profiling accompanied by the sort of blood-letting that industrial relations lawyers

can only dream of. At the pointy end, I was teaching literally hundreds of students, and the students at the bottom of the barrel were functionally illiterate. We were constantly aware of being funded by bums on seats or EFTSUs: equivalent full-time student units. We knew how many students we had to cram into the first year every year, and how long we could retain them to get their money before counselling them out of the course.

And then—exhausted by the endless rounds of lectures, tutorials, student counselling, disabilities liaison, committee meetings, web programming, and fending off the departmental politics—I could devote the remaining hour or so of the week to research and publishing. A friend recently told me about a humanities department that had essentially been put into receivership and a new head appointed solely to bring it back into the black. She did so, but also told staff that 'research is something you do after hours, in your own time.'

It is a crude but effective system, not unlike making bricks without straw. Held in place like Prometheus—by the fear of being made redundant, or simply being put on a cycle of contracts, and knowing there is a subclass of hungry PhD graduates longing to usurp your spot—you do exactly as you are told. I'm only grateful that in the 1990s, the grants cargo cult had not yet reached the heights it has now. I think there was still a residual sense that you could carry out good research that led to publications without having to spend a quarter of a million dollars of taxpayers' money. That's no longer the case: the university attitude—like the true mendicants they are—is that if you can't persuade someone else to pay for it, it's not worth doing.

But something more pernicious held me (and many others like me) in the system. It was the memory of my own happy university life as an undergraduate—a commitment to the idea of the university as a place of research, openness to learning, and a genuine devotion to knowledge for its own sake. When you've had an experience like that, you want to share it and help perpetuate a system that can bring so much pleasure, intellectual expansion, and development to so many. This is what makes me—and I suspect

Meyers—most angry about the disintegration of Australian universities: this cynical use of the language of ‘discovery,’ ‘excellence,’ ‘knowledge’ and ‘innovation’ to support ever-increasing numbers of bureaucrats, while research and teaching become fringe activities and the ‘customers’ are denied the joys of a really challenging, mind-expanding higher education.

Meyers skewers the ‘student-centred learning’ myth and the industry of ‘teaching evaluation scholarship’ in chapters 4–6. The utter bilge of educational theory pumped into students in bachelor of education courses for decades has wreaked havoc on the school system, so it’s no wonder incoming students have to be nursed, spoon-fed and pampered through university as well.

For a great many first year students, it is an unexpected and confronting experience to encounter lecturers who actually have a deep understanding of their subject area and consequently, expect that serious effort will be expended in learning. (p. 80)

How true. And this is the point at which many students simply give up, because in their 12 years of schooling they’ve never been really confronted with anything. So to stop them withdrawing, the pampering must begin in earnest. In practice, universities will not punish outrageous plagiarism, even when it’s the vice chancellor who is found guilty, which was exactly what happened in the disgraceful case at Monash University in 2002 (p. 87).

The sciences have suffered the most from this kind of dumbing-down. In the real world, laws of gravity and physics keep buildings standing, roads surfaced, trains on their tracks, and people alive. Even if you fail to understand these laws, they will still continue to operate, and failure to understand them has very real consequences.

We continue to act as if this is true, and this shows our real educational priorities. You expect anaesthetists to calculate the dosage correctly so you open your eyes after the procedure rather than midway. The levels of self-esteem, personal

fulfilment, engagement, and active learning seen during their training are of remarkably little consequence; you just want them to remember the damn stuff and get it right.

Like prodigal children, we have squandered our educational inheritance. Now reduced to chewing on dry husks to the tune of *The East is Red*, perhaps it’s time to consider returning to our father’s house via long, hard roads. Meyers presents some options: re-stratify the system to return to actual universities for genuine high achievers, intensive teaching and research, and technical schools and colleges of advanced education or degree mills for everyone else trying to stay off the dole queue. Those Centres for Adult Education (CAEs) that were converted into universities during the 1980s and 1990s will of course fight this tooth and nail.

Meyers has some other suggestions too—from deliberately pursuing an elite recruitment model like the one that’s used in sports to the administration of botox to university administrators by ‘recent graduates from a problem-based e-learning program delivered by casual staff with a full suitcase of educational credentials.’ (p. 165) I like the sound of the latter, but the former may be more productive, as would Meyers’ repeated call for overhauling the primary and secondary educational systems. It’s a challenging and terrifying read, but Meyers must be congratulated for hitting so many nails squarely on the head.

Endnotes

- 1 John Morris, ‘Teachers union right to ban NAPLAN tests,’ *Solidarity Online* (2 February 2010).
- 2 ‘Kumar jailed over Curtin visa test fraud,’ *ABC News* (26 March 2012).
- 3 It is obviously difficult to know how many student visa overstayers there are in Australia, although a 2011 media story gave the figures as 1,900 in 2008–09, 6,800 in 2009–10, and 8,300 in 2011. John Ross, ‘Illegal students not “a great concern”,’ *The Australian* (1 November 2011). The percentage is small compared to the number of student visas granted, but 8,300 people is still quite a large number of individuals in real terms of accessing housing, benefits and employment.