

University Quality Explainer (Part 4) – Standard Quality

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When COVID 19 showed how ill-prepared (and inadequate?) most world governments were in respect to dealing with a sudden (but not entirely unanticipated) major epidemic our higher education providers were also plunged into a quandary.

Bagless Cats

For most *governments* the issue was one of maintaining social control whilst also providing medical support and contagion control – cost effectively. Let's face it - scientists and health authorities had for decades been predicting further epidemics and Swine Flu and Avian Flu had also recently shown the potential for super-bugs to impact large populations. From China to Australia and the UK, government handling of COVID measures was uneven and at times (to say the least) 'shoddy'. Where were the government epidemic disaster plans, medical stockpiles, medical isolation facilities and medical practitioner preparedness for dealing with such occurrences? Essentially, no government had been interested in funding such approaches for an event which might not occur during their time in office.

The cat was out of the '*you can trust the government bag*' for many – particularly in Victoria's draconian and racially divisive lockdowns and in the UK leadership's ineptness and subsequent scandals around how (and who) gained COVID funding for preparing protective masks and other materials.

And for our *universities*? It swiftly arose that universities reliant upon between 20-50% of their income from international students could become financially unviable if international students were sent back home and new students could not enrol during an extended epidemic. The 'cat was out of the bag' on tertiary institutions' over reliance upon foreign student fees (though those in the Higher Education sector had long known this fact).

The other cat freed from containment relates to *students* no longer coming to campus but working online at times of their own choosing. And this cat is refusing to go back into the bag anytime soon.

There are many more cats currently on the loose. For example, academic staff, in Victoria, will soon have working from home enshrined in regional law. They will be less visible on campuses as a given right.

Quality of the student experience

And what does any of this mean for 'quality' in terms of the student experience of university? Well, the notion of '*being on campus and engaging with the wonderful minds of scintillating and searingly bright peers and faculty*' becomes less and less likely. In reality - most research-facing academics want to concentrate upon their careers and reputation building research more than spend time with undergraduates.

It is a truth less spoken that high-cite, internationally renowned and active university professors are usually paid to produce quality research rather than spend much time with undergraduates. Endless teaching focussed lecturers, PhD students and other embryonic super-stars are usually the folk who end up lecturing, tutoring and mentoring undergrads. Not that this really matters. Competent and knowledgeable teaching staff usually do that task very well. Much of what Einstein, Habermas, Hawking or Rosalind Franklin had to say would probably have had more benefit to postgraduate students than to the formative skill levels and capacities representative of many undergraduate bodies. So that cat-bag is empty, and the myth dispelled. *Most undergraduates have more chance of being struck by lightning than being regularly taught or supervised by a Nobel Laureate.*

Whilst research has shown that the notion of 'being on campus' and gaining from intermingling with academic greats remains an ideal amongst Australian students the reality is that, since Covid, swathes of students are preferring not to make the journey to their campuses but are accessing course materials, lectures and tutorials remotely and are completing course requirements without ever visiting the university library in person.

What else has changed?

To progress changes to the milieu incrementally, it is necessary to link notions of university education to the revolutions technology and new societal expectations are making to education.

The 'potted' version of this argument runs thus:

Schooling for everyone and university for all are very modern concepts and practices. Schooling has become an expectation and requirement for all children (in the West) during the last 200 years +/- . Universities, by comparison, are only recently becoming more accessible and viable for a growing numbers of students.

Universities (*the grand few*) have been in situ for many centuries. They originally set the mould for undergraduates being free to return to their estates or rural activities during the summer season. Pre - the Industrial Revolution – and up to WWII – many people were required to bring in the harvests and prepare fields for re-sowing, etc. Schools and universities closed for long summer vacations in these agrarian economies in order to provide stewardship or labour to complete farming activities.

School and university student calendars are yet to fully recognise and reflect the redundancy and wasted resources summer term closures represent.

- Online technologies are pushing the boundaries forward for the study at any time 24/7 potentials of undergraduate education.

- As students attend campuses less and less – the value of having large, physical infrastructure investments in teaching facilities becomes questionable.
- Universities offering blended, online, intensive mode pathways could reduce costs significantly – providing their degrees were of reliable quality and met the required standards. Herein, a nationally, internationally mandated standard becomes the natural guarantee of graduate experience and quality.
- As mentioned in previous blogs, an ever-present dichotomy has been the notion of universities once being able to offer a very balanced, broad, humanities inclusive underpinning of higher education.

The most elite institutions still seek to give students the philosophical and humanities-based capacities desirable for them to equipose their judgements and notions of societal responsibilities. Those outside the elite tier, concentrate more not upon rounded human understanding but upon discipline knowledge. This is especially so within some Sciences and Engineering – though most disciplines currently have scant curricular room for students to gain exposure to other modes of ‘interpreting, knowing and explaining’ the world they live in.

The other side of this equation supports technical and industrially relevant skills and knowledge being taken out of ‘university structures’ and placed in the old polytechnic skills and training environments considered more relevant to their role in preparing people for the workforce.

There are other training and skills areas, amalgamated within universities in the 1970s, that could equally well stand closer to their professional spheres. Teacher Education is one such discipline which has languished in academia for over four decades and is now contributing to a profession increasingly devoid of the good morale and graduate interest it possessed before being removed from its professional college roots.

- Finally, why are schools still fully operating upon agrarian based annual calendars?
- For senior school students, could they audit their courses and opportunities differently? Perhaps they could do much of their studies online or in blended modes?

Let’s get that cat out of the ‘traditional school holidays bag’ and move from petrol to electric in our thinking? Or maybe, we could revert to steam engines *but powered by solar?*

No Change Thinking

One answer for slow paced thinking here relates to government calendars. To change how schools and universities utilize the academic year, governments would also have to break their traditional calendars and amend their house sittings (perhaps they might even consider more time in the house than they currently offer...)

So, ultimately, to embrace new technologies fully we need to consider *revising our annual calendars* of work expectations and activities logically and coherently.

Whilst post COVID 'working from home' entitlements are shaking up how business is done we desperately need to also shake-up our concept of university education.

Effectively, Australian universities are operating in an increasingly volatile environment. For example, Julie Hare (2024)* notes that university students are dropping out in huge numbers whilst Erin Morely (2024)** points to large numbers of international students now moving elsewhere as our university fees and our cost of living have become too high.

Our university system is stumbling and is overly reliant on volatile international markets. Our economy, with its minute manufacturing sector and its massive reliance on fossil fuel and minerals exportation, is fragile.

Fundamentally, emulation of the tertiary structures and values of elite institutions which have been inherited from 17th century European approaches to knowledge creation may not serve us well for much longer. At least, they are approaches increasingly not applicable when seeking to provide quality education suitable for the 80% of students the Universities Accord wishes to engage with in the near future.

New technologies and different approaches to how quality is recognised may also provide a better national cost equation than our current university system offers. And - cost is inevitably going to be the number one driver for higher education in the future.

The Australian Universities Accord Report (2023)*** makes relevant suggestions for funding changes to the university sector but it is very much a look inside the tent from those who have vested interests because they also live in the tent. It is not a report that looks at establishing uniform standards for undergraduate education as a main way of interpreting and aligning degree quality as independent from where and how the degrees were studied.

Consequently, the university awarding the qualification will remain perceptually more important and relevant than the standards achieved by all those studying for the same award across the nation.

The possibility of change

The possibility exists, if we have the courage and vision to pursue it, to move away from the academic research narrative that serves the old model so well - but which does not serve the less research effective institutions or their students (the 90% not in Top 100 institutions) to any perceivable advantage.

All of our universities need *not* be focussed on producing elite research. It is a shameful, wasteful use of resources. Consider the low ranked research outputs of the majority of institutions as 'knowledge we didn't need to know' and 'investments in research' we didn't need to make. For undergraduate degrees at least, make gaining a degree a more uniform matter of attaining national standards and set aside notions of elite institutions. There is room for that at the post graduate level.

Our universities will now need to change, either by reacting to their financial fortunes or by design. We suggest the latter represents more opportunity than the former.

**J. Hare, Australian Financial Review, 8th Jan 2024.*

***E. Morely, Campus Review, 29th Jan 2024.*

**** Australian Universities Accord Report 2023 <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>)*

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