



THE UNIVERSITY: AN INSTITUTION OF SOCIETY

Higher education: a social equalizer or economic agent of national competitiveness?

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1. ABSTRACT

From the 1980s onward, globalization has been the catalyst for the transformation of higher education from a pedagogical exchange to a market relationship. As in other developed market economies, the change in Australia has been linked to the reinvention of universities as a tool of economic reconstruction with the primacy of national socio-economic objectives fuelling a transformation in higher education's primary role from that of a social equalizer to an economic agent of national economic competitiveness. This paper reports on an initiative from one regional Australian university, Charles Sturt University, to reinvigorate social imperatives through curriculum renewal of its undergraduate programs.

2. **KEYWORDS** in English: higher education; marketization; curriculum reform; Australia
3. **FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE:** Social and Legal Sciences
4. **SUBJECT AREA:** Evaluation and Institutional Quality – 1.1 The University's Social Engagement
5. **PRESENTATION CATEGORY:** Oral Presentation
6. **DEVELOPMENT:**

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a) Objectives

As in other developed market economies, changes in Australian higher education since the 1980s are linked to the reinvention of universities as a tool of economic reconstruction (Marginson 1995; Miller 1995; Rooney and Hearn 1999). Accordingly, a neo-classical economics perspective and the primacy of national socio-economic objectives have fuelled a transformation in higher education's primary role from that of a social equalizer to an economic agent with a focus on national economic competitiveness (Smyth 1995). Three questions need to be asked: What has been the nature of the change? Where then, has this left the traditional social role of universities? What can be achieved at the level of social engagement through curriculum?

This conference presentation seeks to outline the changing role of Australian universities in the face of globalisation and the transformation of higher education from a pedagogical exchange to a market relationship (e.g. Smyth 1991, 1995; Miller 1995; Baker, Creedy and Johnson 1996). Within this context it offers an exemplar of Charles Sturt University's drive to ensure that in addition to the development of disciplinary and professional knowledge, undergraduate students are offered a range of other learning opportunities that build their capacity to contribute to their community and wider society. The aim of the *CSU Degree* initiative is to foster: international citizenship through the development of an international perspective in their discipline or profession facilitated by opportunities for international experiences and cultural competence through meaningful engagement with the culture, experiences and histories of other communities; understanding of financial, social and environmental sustainability; and a firm understanding of ethics.

b) Description of your work

The Development of the Market-Oriented University

Neave (1990) observes three phases in all western higher education systems. The first is the government retreat from the welfare state since the early 1980s and the consequent reduction of government funding of higher education. In Australia this coincided with the reduction of national budgetary outlay on higher education from 4.5 per cent to less than

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3 per cent (Miller 1991:41) and led to deterioration in buildings, research equipment, student demand and morale. In the second phase, from the end of the 1980s, public-sector reform initiatives were based on efficiency and effectiveness principles, primed by increasing international competition. In Australia it was marked by government intervention under the post-1983 Labor Government that sought to rationalise the industry and make it relate to the needs of the economy in general, and to the trade deficit in particular. The third phase from the early 1990s saw a decline in public financing of higher education and the advent of more market competition. Coinciding with this period, policy and legislation in Australia led to the abolition of the binary divide between the college of advanced education (polytechnic) and university sectors. This abolition had resulted in mergers, and by 1991 there was the subsequent reduction of 80 colleges of advanced education and universities to only 35. There was a restructuring of the industry with the establishment of the Australian Research Council (ARC) to distribute public research funding to institutions. The ARC funded applications for grants on a competitive basis and against the background of national priorities. This restructuring brought with it pressure to change university government from the collegial to the corporate managerial model under the banner of 'accountability' and good public sector management. There was also pressure to find efficiencies and re-evaluate the ways in which educational services were delivered.

Since Neave's (1990) review, a further wave of reform in Australian higher education is in train triggered by major policy reforms from the Commonwealth Government and consistent with overseas trends such as those identified in the 2003 *British White Paper on Higher Education Reform*. The changes were flagged by the report *Backing Australia's Future: Higher Education Reform at the Crossroads* (2002) and are aimed at re-engineering universities into more entrepreneurial, productive and diverse organizations through the creation of a demand-driven market in higher education. In 2003 the then Minister for Education, Science and Training in the Commonwealth Government introduced sweeping changes known as the Nelson reforms which were "the biggest shake-up of higher education in more than a decade" (Nelson cited in Maiden 2003:29), aimed at "greater rationalization of the sector" through market competition. The reforms are based on assumptions that the market will expand and revenues will diversify while also propelling higher standards and improved productivity (Marginson 2003:11).

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This strategy has been described as the privatization of universities by stealth from within, with Commonwealth financial support in 2004 accounting for 40% or less of overall university income (Davis 2004:29). The core of the Nelson reform package was the increase in total funding by \$2.4 billion extra over five years with \$404 million contingent on universities making governance reforms and \$55 million for workplace and productivity tied to industrial relations changes. Universities could also increase total domestic fee-paying students from 25% of a total course number to 50% (Buckell 2003:19) and set student fees up to 30% of the Government nominated benchmark.

The market reforms continued in 2008 with the Commonwealth Government commissioning a *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley 2008) to assess the quality and performance of the nation's higher education system which it was acknowledged underpinned economic and social progress. The outcome has been increased funding for the sector with parameters designed to secure national long term prosperity through the upskilling of the Australian workforce. Integral to the package is greater exposure of universities to market forces (<http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/ReviewPages/default.aspx>).

In 2012 the Commonwealth Government walked away from decades of close regulation of universities and created in its stead, a demand driven market for undergraduate places in all Australian universities, thereby placing the logic of markets at the centre of enrolments and funding (Davis 2012). The Government now provides funds to institutions based on the number of undergraduate students who enroll, without any capping or ceiling on volume, and without the protection of quotas. It is not a completely de-regulated system. Price controls still remain on undergraduate courses, however, it is widely anticipated that the sector's exposure to the market will be complete within a few years, with the deregulation of price widely tipped to follow. In the demand-driven deregulated system, if universities fail to attract student enrolments it follows that amalgamation or closure will follow. It also follows that to maintain growth universities now must aggressively compete with each other in the market. The consequent challenge ahead for universities is to reconcile the academic tradition of education as a public good imbued with values of public service, with education as a commodity amidst the pressing imperatives of marketplace culture (Davis 2012).

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The Impact of Marketisation on the Social Role of the University

So what have been the outcomes of the significant shift to marketization (Bottery 1999: 104) and the commodity view of education in which educational institutions are drawn into the market, producing and selling knowledge? One of the casualties has been the role of universities as social equalizers. Universities now have 'customers' rather than students. They have moved from an orientation of social knowledge to market knowledge (Buchbinder 1993:35). They are places where once the value of knowledge lay in its contribution to the pursuit of truth and liberty, but now in the marketized higher education system knowledge is valued according to its 'performative value'- its ability to be assimilated to information that can be conveyed through information communication technology (ICT) then used by the consumer/customer to enhance efficient performance. Knowledge only has value if it is in the form of information that has the potential to bring direct benefit to the consumer (Usher et al. 1997) as adjudged by them.

Philosopher John Passmore (1997) warns of the unintended consequences of inappropriately transferring a familiar institutional pattern to relationships of a very different character, for example, identifying authoritarian leaders as "the father of their people". For Passmore, such is the case with the term 'customer', derived from the current model institution of the shopping market, with its distinction between producers who want to sell at the highest price and customers who wish to pay as little as possible. Passmore maintains that the use of the term 'customer' in agencies such as hospitals and universities transforms these agencies into places where medical care and training are sold as part of a normal commercial transaction. The logical extension of this is that the patient and student both have consumer rights and that if they have the cash, they have the right to purchase that service. Similarly, if they do not have the financial wherewithal, they cannot purchase the service. To Passmore the thought that medical assistance and education should be available only to those who can afford them is unacceptable in a humane society. So too is the potential for sellers, if sales are falling off, to lower prices and similarly, for universities to lower standards in order to retain numbers. The unintended consequence of this may be the release into the community of incompetent doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers and teachers (Passmore 1997:10).

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The former Chief Justice of New South Wales, the Honourable J. Spiegelman has also expressed concerns about the new commodified approach that tends to reduce citizens to consumers. While he acknowledges the merits of organizations meeting consumer or client needs, he stresses that one's status as a consumer is only a subset of one's role as a citizen.

One of the difficulties with this approach is that it tends to reduce citizens to consumers ... Consumers have desires or needs. Citizens have rights and duties. The perspective of citizenship is of greater significance for many areas of public activity than the perspective of consumerism (Spiegelman 2002:12).

Spiegelman extends this concern to the impact on the Australian university of the student-as-customer metaphor. So how is it possible to retain the social role of the university as an institution that meets its social obligations to its community and the wider global world, yet successfully operate in a marketized environment?

CSU Degree Initiative (CSUDI) at Charles Sturt University, Australia

CSU is a regional university based on the east coast of Australia. In 2010 there were 32,645 domestic students and 5,319 international students (total of 37,964). 61.5% (23,367) of these study by distance education. Only 38.5% (14,597) study on campus (9,568) or by mixed mode (5,029). It has a staff of 673 academics and 1144 general and administrative staff spread across 10 campuses and a dozen partner institutions. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses in arts, business, education, science (veterinary, environmental) health sciences (dentistry, pharmacy, nursing) and policing. It positions itself in the higher education market as the university serving rural and regional Australia, although not limited to this niche.

The *CSUDI* is a whole of institution change process that fosters attributes of professional competence and global citizenship (Bradley 2009) and is currently being piloted across the university. Through a design-based approach to curriculum renewal that delivers innovative learning and teaching, the *CSUDI* is a commitment to the principles of sustainability, ethics and global citizenship, internationalization and indigenization which is central to university-wide strategy and operationalised in practice at the chalkface. It is a different approach to graduate attributes that instigates a fundamental paradigm shift in

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thinking that brings transformation rather than peripheral change in how undergraduate courses are designed and taught (<http://eportfolio.csu.edu.au/pebblepad/viewasset.aspx?oid+95503&type+webfolio> created by M. Childs, accessed 20.1.12). Its focus is the student learning experience and consideration of the graduate attributes that are to be fostered throughout an undergraduate student's program.

As part of this central university strategy, the *CSUDI* is supported by a strengthening of the teaching-research nexus in the critical target areas of sustainability, ethics and global citizenship, internationalization and indigenization, something which it is hoped will contribute to ongoing renewal of the curriculum as academic staff remain engaged and current in their disciplinary expertise. It is also supported by Indigenous studies resources comprising Indigenous community leaders, academic experts and an online resource database. As an additional thrust, consistent with fostering the attribute of global citizenship, the university has increased opportunities for wider educational experiences for CSU undergraduate students through international study tours integrated into subject delivery as well as cross-institution student exchange opportunities. For example, students can enroll in subjects that take welfare students to India and trainee teachers to schools in Nepal.

To achieve this major paradigm shift for the university, the primary focus of the *CSUDI* is *course level strategy* in order to develop ongoing renewal through collaboration between course and subject teams in tasks such as course, subject and assessment mapping. In line with this, new academic management structures have been created at the course level to promote and evaluate the effectiveness of the *Initiative*. For example, at the course level academics in the new role of Course Director provide an overarching quality assurance role across courses, something that provides cohesion and continuity of *Initiative* themes in curriculum content and assessments. As a result subjects are being developed within each disciplinary area that focus on the target principles. As an example, recognition of the need for CSU psychology graduates to be culturally competent when dealing with Indigenous clients has led to the inclusion of the subject Psychology and Indigenous People, which is a study of the history of psychology's European interpretation of indigeneity and indigenous history, with critique of the accompanying cultural rationale for colonialism and domination of Aboriginal people in

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Australia since the British colonialists arrived in 1788. It is consistent with the teaching and learning approach of critical reflection linked to the development of citizenship in our graduates.

Another example of course level strategy can be seen in the Faculty of Business where academic staff teaching in undergraduate courses have mapped the learning objectives of each subject with content, matched against *CSUDI* principles. This has provided an overview of the curriculum coverage and target themes within courses and the linkages between subjects.

At the subject level the traditional disciplinary content is being infused with problem solving tasks to foster an understanding of the *CSUDI* principles in our students. It shifts the focus to the student learning experience and their engagement and fosters a deeper level of learning, understanding and behavioural change. As part of this process academic staff have been encouraged to reflect upon their delivery methods and encouraged to embark upon innovation in their teaching that aligns with an enriched student learning experience. For example, in the Business Faculty's foundation management subject this process has facilitated an explicit focus on the global context of managing, sustainability, corporate social responsibility and responsible management of change for all stakeholders. Class discussion and group work (online for distance education students, and face-to-face for on campus students) facilitate active student engagement through student centred learning. The foundation economics subject also adopts a problem solving approach with students at the centre. Real-world case studies as well as problem based learning through scenarios, contribute to discussion, debate and critical reflection.

Given that the majority of students are studying by distance the challenge has been to develop innovative delivery methods using web technologies to network students in metropolitan and remote locations around Australian and from around the world. In the Arts Faculty a foundation subject in sociology has used online project sites in the university's learning management system (LMS) to establish teams of students in problem based learning tasks. Teams, comprising of both distance education students (usually mature age students, usually in employment and often with family responsibilities) and on-campus students (usually under 25, full-time students, single) work together online in dedicated team project sites to research, discuss and develop a

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presentation for the entire subject cohort. For example one of the issues that students consider is that of the National Apology made by the Parliament of Australia and the then Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd in 2008 to the generations of Aboriginal children who were removed from their families until the 1970s and placed in institutions, as part of the Government policy of assimilation. Together online, students discuss whether the Apology has made any difference to the material, social and political inequalities experienced by Indigenous Australians, and whether it has affected their own lives.

At the subject level, *at the point of delivery* the *CSUDI* empowers academic teachers to integrate the target principles with innovative teaching and learning. Staff, irrespective of their political persuasion, report that it “energizes them”. As one academic said: “It’s about repositioning ourselves as academic teachers and feeling a stronger connection with our students on issues that affect all our lives”. What the *CSUDI* gives staff is a legitimate platform to raise the basic issues of citizenship such as environmental sustainability, gender, the treatment of minorities, ethical decision making, irrespective of one’s discipline. It also makes academic teachers reflect on their delivery and syllabus.

As one economics lecturer said: “Economics is about managing resources in a very responsible way in order to achieve the outcomes for the whole of the population. Our students need to be well informed about environmental issues amidst changing perceptions about the use of resources. The focus for economists from 2015 to 2045 will of necessity focus on sustainability. What the *CSUDI* does is to encourage both staff and students to think more about it. It gives teaching staff additional fire in what is a very exciting time in the discipline and for us as teachers it has both personal and professional resonance We are training business leaders of the future and many of our students will return to their regional communities and Indigenous communities more aligned with an understanding of the future ... It’s about being proud of living in Australia and the standard of living and economic security, but also about comparative economics such that as global citizens we ask students to compare our national economy with those of other countries and we encourage them to go to different databases on human development for a comparative analysis.” For us all, education brings with it an obligation for global citizenship.

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b) Results and/or conclusions

With the transformation in higher education's primary role from that of a social equalizer to an economic agent with a focus on national economic competitiveness, Australian universities are faced with the potential contradiction of chasing market imperatives while at the same time remaining true to their social charter. CSU's approach of creating an identity for its undergraduate programs that is grounded in values of citizenship and sustainability serves both demands. It sits well with its dual functions of providing both professional education that serves the community and its extra role of mentoring first generation university students from low socio-economic areas in regional and remote Australia.

The potential pitfall for this initiative is that it may develop into merely a mapping and compliance exercise. If it becomes merely a 'tick-the-box' exercise, force-fitting existing curriculum into the appropriate (or inappropriate as the case may be) tick box for each *CSUDI* principle then it will serve no purpose. However, if the momentum continues to grow behind it and Faculty is energized by the platform for social justice that it potentially affords, then it will be the foundation of a whole-of-institution change process and potentially a whole new way of 'doing business'.

Although still in the implementation phase initial indicators suggest that students are seeing value in the *CSUDI* approach and the pathway that it creates for them to make a contribution through both their professional and personal lives to their broader community. Competition is heating up in the Australian university sector as the protected regulatory environment is dismantled and institutions are exposed to the full force of the market, however the *CSUDI* approach is creating one pathway for securing the future of the university in a marketized environment as well as meeting its social obligations.

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