'Profitable for the country'. An Australian historical perspective of the contested purpose of public universities

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the social contract formulated between state and university, in the period 1850–1930. Using contemporary records – for example, legislation, parliamentary debates, university acts, newspaper articles, senate and professorial board minutes, and similar – this article examines how Australia's early scholarly community contested and negotiated what it believed to be the purpose of higher education, with a sometimes-conflicting view held by the state. The analysis indicates that, from the outset, certain paradoxes have inscribed into these foundational negotiations. Conflicting narratives of opportunity and privilege positioned universities, simultaneously, as agents for social inclusion and maintainers of social privilege. The purpose of knowledge as either/both pure and practical has been another point of contestation. Consequently, universities vacillate between acts of social conservatism and progressivism. These tensions remain apparent in the modern purpose of higher education institutions.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyse, through the historical record, the ways in which paradoxes of social progression-versus-social conservatism, and pragmatic-versus-pure knowledge have been inscribed, from the outset, into the founding acts and missions of Australia's first universities. I argue that these paradoxes are a direct consequence of how our states' first universities were founded, and their social contracts negotiated between state and institution. In support of their search for knowledge – an activity at times elitist and insular – universities were required by the state to connect with their communities and contribute to nation building. These missions remain often in conflict; a conflict that is neither recent nor resolved.

To this end, this article critically examines the formation of Australia's higher education sector from 1850, with the founding of the first university, through to the 1930s, when the notion of a national higher education sector was, though not fully formed, a conceptual reality. This article aims to identify the factors that gave rise to particular issues at a formative stage in our nation's history, and the ways in which both the state and universities have responded to them. The analysis suggests that the modern 'paradoxical' university is not only a result of evolving social forces, but also of initial, sustaining principles.

This article draws upon the press of the day, senate reports, professorial board minutes, official institutional histories, political papers, academic publications, lectures, and public submissions. These sources have been chosen for their insights into how the government, the higher education sector and the wider public understood and interpreted the social contract between university and state. More than 200 publicly available sources were identified: primarily through special university archive collections; the online resource TROVE; and relevant academic literature. Combined, they represent a public and ongoing

discussion about the purpose of the Australian university, what its goals should be, who should benefit, and who should participate in its functions. This debate is relevant far beyond the Australian experience. As this article will show, the policy directions adopted in Australia were informed by international movements – of people, ideas, and beliefs – and reveal tensions between old- and new-world education values that were and continue to be felt in many other countries.

Background

In both scholarly research and lived experience, the modern university is constructed on a foundation of conflicting ideals. It is, simultaneously, an enclave 'exercising its power of social discrimination beyond the reach of pedagogical or political vigilance' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 22), and a means of social advancement. In Australia in 1950, just over 30,000 students were enrolled in higher education (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2001), representing approximately half of a percent of the adult population. In 2017, that number was over 1.2 million (Department of Education and Training, 2017), approximately 6.5% of adults. Yet still, people from middle to upper socio-economic backgrounds remain, in proportional terms, significantly over-represented in higher education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Universities have always acted both as a vehicle for social mobility, and a means of creating and maintaining privilege (Forsyth, 2014).

   Similarly, the ways in which knowledge is today constructed and deconstructed by higher education institutions reveal certain paradoxes. The modern Australian example draws upon some principles of the medieval European university, which was in many ways a collection of autonomous guilds, eluding the control of both the nation and the university itself (Verger, 1991). Later, these universities became a finishing school for the elite; later still they incorporated John Henry Newman's idea of the university as a temple of received wisdom (1853), and the Humboltian educational ideal, which integrated the arts and sciences with research to arrive at a more holistic model of higher education (Bexley, 2013). Also, a 'new world' model of the university was emerging from North America, whereby the university was more closely connected to its community, aligned with the pragmatic, social, and economic interests of their citizens and one thus 'intimately related to the people' (Board & New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1909, p. 39). The Australian experience of the time was just one example of an international trend towards the vocationalism and professionalism of higher education.

   These two issues – changing student demographics and clashing ideals of the use of knowledge – have created their own, conflicting interplays. A more diverse student body has challenged understandings of what knowledge is, how it is constructed, and whether these new forms of knowledge are to be embraced by universities as an opportunity, or resisted as a challenge to their authority (Pitman & Vidovich, 2015). Inevitably, community or group participation necessarily creates demands for conformity (McFadyen & Cannella, 2004). Bourdieu presented this social exchange as a zero-sum game, whereby the 'miraculous exceptions' – those beating the social odds to make it to university – become co-opted into the universities' game of social discrimination or in his words, 'oblates' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 104). Other research, however, has found a more positive relationship between student diversity, and the learning and democracy outcomes of higher education (e.g., Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). The sometimes conflicting

and at other times conflation of principles of elite status and elitism are revealed both in how universities and state imagined the purpose of higher education, and how those within universities interpreted their role as agents of social change.

'Profitable for the country': the clash between values of the Enlightenment and late-modernity

In the founding colonies of Australia, the idea of higher education was one that was only loosely universal. It is the case that the first Australian universities had multiple, Anglo influences. At the same time, however, a proto Anglo-Australian identity was being shaped by immigration, both of people and ideas. Cultural colonisation was facilitated by the assisted passages of British and Irish immigrants and also through unassisted passages of many other clergymen, teachers, graziers, businessmen, professionals, miners, and railwaymen (Jupp, 2002). Consequently, ideas of who did, and did not belong in a university were more fluid than previously held in Western Europe. For their part, Australian universities accepted, quickly, if not from the outset, the notion that men and women of all classes could enter through their gates provided they were, in the words of one, of 'good fame and character' (University of Western Australia Archives Agency 215, 1913). In the decades that followed their creation, the sons and eventually daughters of not only the colonies' elite would aspire to higher education but also those of bone merchants, tailors, blacksmiths, policemen, saddlers, plumbers, and publicans. Whether they were admitted, however, was another matter, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

Intellectually, the first Australian universities were built in a liminal space demarcated by the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of late modernity. The Enlightenment bequeathed the notion to scholars that reason was the primary source of justice and knowledge, as well as an increasing critique of religious authority. However, contemporary documents indicate that 'knowledge for knowledge's sake' was a view being challenged far earlier than in the latter part of the twentieth century. For example, the Act incorporating the University of Sydney, Australia's first university, pointedly referred to the 'promotion of useful knowledge' (An Act to Incorporate and Endow the University of Sydney, 1850, p. 1) as a core function of the institution. 'Useful' is of course a relative term and the relationship between university and state meant that what 'useful' entailed would become a frequent and ongoing point of contestation.

The medieval universities that preceded Australia's were financed by a combination of private benefactors and religious orders, as well as the state. The highest education would be, as the New South Wales Director of Education claimed in 1909, 'not that which enables the student to enjoy his books in the arm chair of his leisured hours, but rather that which best enables him to render services by doing something that other people want done' (Board & New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1909, p. 41). As noted above, the founding act of the University of Sydney made specific reference to 'useful' knowledge. Similarly, the Act, incorporating the University of Queensland in that same year, required it to 'provide the means of obtaining a liberal and practical education in the several pursuits and professions of life in Queensland' (University of Queensland Act 1909, p. 9460 (QLD)). For its part, the University of Western Australia's Act in 1911 required that 'provision should be made for further instruction in those practical arts and

liberal studies which are needed to advance the prosperity and welfare of the people' (The University of Western Australia Act 1911, p. 9 (WA)). Thus, a utilitarian, social contract was enacted, almost uniformly, across most of Australia's founding universities.

In 1891, a Royal Commission into the establishment of a university in the State of Queensland was set up. It comprised twenty-three members, of which thirteen were university graduates and five clergymen. The Government was represented by the Premier, the Solicitor General, the Ministers for Public Instruction and Power, and the Under Secretary to the Department of Public Instruction. There were included one judge, the headmasters of two grammar schools, three doctors, and six lawyers (Bryan, 1952). The Commission reported:

> Merely literary instruction, highly desirable in itself, and therefore not to be neglected as contributing to the grace, enlightenment and enjoyment of life, is not of such primary necessity in a newly settled country as the knowledge and practical arts which sustain existence, and upon which life is really based. (Queensland Legislative Assembly, 1891, p. XVIII)

The Commission concluded therefore that 'on economic grounds alone, then, the University would be profitable to the country; the waste in mining work alone through ignorance shows the economic value of knowledge' (Queensland Legislative Assembly, 1891, p. XVIII).

Similar aims were explicated in the 1910 report of the Royal Commission on the Establishment of a University in Western Australia, which was also comprised of a mixture of academic, political, religious and professional personnel:

> Our conception of a University has changed. University education is no longer regarded as the luxury of the rich, which concerns only those who can afford to pay heavily for it. Science is now one of the greatest necessities of a nation; and our Universities must become as much the insurers of future progress as battleships are the insurers of the present power of states. (Western Australia Parliament, 1910, p. 11)

The Commission was unambiguous that the primary purpose of the university should be to 'raise the standard of education and knowledge, and not merely to turn out every year a number of scholars and experts in Literature, Science, Art and Technology' (Western Australia Parliament, 1910, p. 15). The recommended model prioritised practical education, especially that which increased economic productivity. Of course, this was not a uniquely Australian conceptualisation of the purpose of higher education. Rather it was further evidence of a worldwide trend stemming from the technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution. As Cartwright (1945, p. 285) observed, 'the machine … demanded mastery. And masters had to be trained'.

However, in order to deliver their 'new world' priorities, the colonies drew on the expertise of 'Old World' academic human capital, which had different values and priorities. In 1849, the select committee of the New South Legislative Council, considering the case for a university, had recommended that the foundation chairs of study should be in Classics, Mathematics, Chemistry, Natural History, Experimental Philosophy, and Civil Engineering, Anatomy, Physiology, and Medicine. Later additions were Modern History, Political Economy, and Modern Languages. These additions reflected a departure from the Oxbridge model of scholarly inquiry (Westbury, 1961). Foley (1998) regards this departure as an early victory for the vocationalists' vision of a

university. However, when it came time to filling the professorial chairs, a committee appointed by the University recommended that the Faculty of Arts receive the first preference as it formed 'the foundation of any complete system' (extract from Report, as cited in Westbury, 1961, p. 266). Later, the inaugural Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Charles Nicholson, wrote to the Governor of the colony, complaining about a 'mercenary view which depreciates as unsuitable to the colony any outlay on objects of a not strictly utilitarian nature' (Charles Nicholson, as cited in Westbury, 1961, p. 269). That the Chancellor spoke of the vocational aims of education pejoratively gives us an insight into how the social contract between institution and state was viewed as a potential threat to Old-World academic values.

In 1910, the WA Royal Commission called upon testimony from Professor McCallum of the University of Sydney, vis-à-vis the curriculum and constitution of the proposed Western Australian University. Professor McCallum believed 'the nucleus of any University in Australia [should be the] arts and pure science' (Western Australia Parliament, 1910, p. 20). Elsewhere, he stressed: 'I most vigorously advocate the form of a Professor of Classics if you cannot afford to [also have a professor of English Literature]' (Western Australia Parliament, 1910, p. 20). Yet in its final report to Parliament, the Commission made its own, alternative priorities clear, recommending that 'courses of study in Agriculture, Mining, and Engineering should, in the opinion of your Commission, be undertaken at the outset' (Western Australia Parliament, 1910, p. 16).

At a meeting of university leaders in Sydney in May, 1920, the Chancellor of the University of Sydney spoke of the 'problem … arising out of the terms and conditions upon which the bounty of the State is to be enjoyed' (University of Western Australia Archives Agency 215, 1920, p. 6). The 'problem', as the Chancellor saw it, was that the states were dictating to the universities what skills and professions were required by students, rather than allowing the institutions to follow their own, more reflective path:

> I utterly reject the idea that Universities exist for the purpose of enabling the youth of the country to 'raise themselves' … [it is wrong] to talk about a country youth 'raising himself' by escaping from his surroundings and becoming in the city a more successful professional man, or politician, or nothing more … sometimes I find myself wishing that I had never taken the King's shilling and sealed my mouth in official reticence, for I would like just once or twice to tell my countrymen what I really think of that and a few other matters. (University of Western Australia Archives Agency 215, 1920, pp. 7–8)

In 1919, the Chairman of the Administrative Committee of the Australian spent three months in North America, visiting and asking questions of institutions in the US and Canada. One particular observation illuminates how distinctions between the vocational and humanistic aims of higher education were both trends and sources of tension in higher education internationally:

> … while I was there, a professor (described to me as 'the eminent Hog man') was giving a series of lectures to the livestock raisers of Riverside County. He was telling them what constitutes a good hog; why a pure-bred hog returns more, per dollar put into him, than any other kind; and so forth … I do not know the scientific worth of such University operations … But there seems to me something of real value in University Extension that brings a scientific interest into the work of so many farmers. (Holme, 1920, p. 177)

In other words, such applied research did not represent 'real' scientific enquiry; however, it was acknowledged that the university had some responsibility, via outreach, to impart

knowledge more widely. As in other countries, Australian universities had to learn to manage, if not reconcile, the needs of the state with its own priorities. Internationally, the essence of the social contract between state and university is well understood, as summarised by Gunston and Keniston (1994): Government promises to fund the research that peer-reviewers find most worthy, and scientists promise to undertake the research diligently, towards discoveries that can be translated into product, medicine or weapons.

'The pinch of poverty': universities, fees and the social contract

Social inclusion was clearly contracted, by the state, into the institutional mission of the colonies' first universities. The phrase 'open to all classes and denominations of [His/ Her] Majesty's subjects' was used by the Universities of Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Queensland in their acts. The University of Western Australia's Act stated 'it is desirable that special encouragement and assistance should be afforded those who may be hindered in the acquisition of sound knowledge and useful learning by lack of opportunity or means' (The University of Western Australia Act 1911, p. 9). The acts were all required to be passed through colonial/state parliament. Aspirations towards social inclusion were therefore legally inscribed.

This created both ideological and practical challenges for some universities. For example, there were initial plans for the University of Queensland to exempt students from paying fees, as it was believed by many that in order for a public institution to be open to all, this financial barrier should be removed. However, others were opposed, and the ideological position for doing so was expressed by the Inspector General of Schools, Mr R.H. Roe, who argued that 'the abolition of mere fees would not open the university doors to the poor, and would for the most part simply exempt from fees many who were able and willing to pay them' (Telegraph, 1910, p. 4). It was preferable, Roe argued, that instead scholarships be offered which, whilst being distributed on merit, would surely result in the majority being 'won by young men and women from houses where the pinch of poverty had been felt, and where strength of character and earnestness of purpose had been gained by the early necessity for hard work and self denial' (Telegraph, 1910, p. 5). Ultimately, the University of Queensland charged fees.

In Western Australia, the chairman and commissioners of the Royal Commission into founding a university had been publicly committed to free higher education, notwithstanding the argument that this would, eventually, impose a significant financial burden on the State (Alexander, 1963). This burden did, indeed, come to pass. In 1919, a request by the University for £2,000, to cover teaching costs due to increased enrolments, was rejected by the government (Alexander, 1963). In 1921, the Vice Chancellor wrote to the Premier of Western Australia. Referencing a 1912 resolution by the government that 'all education at the University of Western Australia should be free' (University of Western Australia Archives Agency 215, 1921, p. 1), the Vice Chancellor reminded the Premier that the Act incorporating the University nonetheless allowed it to charge fees, should it so determine:

> … if the Legislative Assembly … still wishes that view to be interpreted by the University Senate as a command, it is incumbent upon the government to make as full provision for the free University as for the other State Educational establishments … Until the Senate is given a grant compensating it for the lack of the customary source of income from fees, it must find

increasing difficulty in carrying out the desire of the Legislative Assembly for a free University. (University of Western Australia Archives Agency 215, 1921, pp. 1–2)

This was a not-so-subtle reminder by the Vice Chancellor that the social contract was twoway: if the Government required the University to be free then it needed to support it to do so. This exchange also revealed how both sides had the possibility to use absolute power but preferred not to. The University could charge fees without seeking permission from the Government, as the Act allowed. Equally, the Government could legislate to change the Act, removing this possibility forever. However, the University preferred to seek state financial support rather than alienate community members and ultimately the Government bowed to political (i.e., social) pressure and increased the grant.

In all other states, universities charged tuition fees and argued that scholarships were sufficient to support poorer students. Writing in 1935, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, R.E. Priestley, defended his institution's efforts to widen participation through the provision of tuition-free scholarships:

> It might with justice be claimed, indeed, that we err as much in the fact that we take into our Universities many persons who are not sufficiently endowed by Nature to benefit fully from a University education … It is certainly true that many scholarship holders make disappointing University examination records. (Priestley, 1935, p. 23)

Priestley did however concede that 'this may partly be because we fail in what we give them at the University after their arrival' (Priestley, 1935, p. 23). Writing again in 1937, Priestley considered the place of the university in a democratic society. Arguing that attempts to educate all persons had hitherto failed, and that 'the University's part should be greater than the one we have admitted in the past', he nonetheless argued, 'The first and basic aspect of the problem belongs to our schools. The bulk of our citizens can never come inside the University at all' (Priestley, 1937, p. 25).

There is a long antecedent, therefore, to the contemporary argument that it is not possible to create a social contract between university and state without considering the wider social/educational contract. The attributes of schools do matter (Gemici, Lim, & Karmel, 2013). This should not, however, be used as an excuse for a higher education institution to abrogate its own, particular responsibility in this regard.

'A manly woman': Australian universities as both enablers and inhibiters of social advancement

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Australia's first universities vacillated between passive acceptance of wider social discrimination, and leading efforts to challenge them. As early as 1869, the University of Melbourne started receiving correspondence from people asking whether women could sit the institution's matriculation examinations, which were the prerequisite to enrolling in undergraduate studies (see University of Melbourne, 1869–1889). Within the University, the majority view was typified by the Archbishop of Melbourne, Charles Perry, who was a member of the University Council:

> … there are very sufficient reasons why [women shouldn't be] subjected to the intellectual strain of a course of university study, or be stimulated to rivalry with a man in a contest for university honours … for her to imitate him in dress, manners, sports, studies or professional

employments, would be to degrade herself … A manly woman is as offensive to me as an effeminate man is despicable. (The Argus, 1872, p. 7)[1]

On the other side, the Chancellor, Anthony Brownless, was the lone dissenting vote on this motion when it came to Council. However, the Registrar of the time, Edward A'Beckett, was instrumental in getting an early case considered by the University, as was the Chair of the Professorial Board, George Halford (Selleck, 2003). In the wider community, there was much support for female students (e.g., Darling Downs Gazette and General Advertiser, 1872; The Advocate, 1871). Ultimately, Australia enrolled its first female university student in 1871, the same year as New Zealand, two years before the same occurrence in the UK, but more than twenty years after the US. In terms of social leadership, Australian universities enrolled women before the country's first property act for women (1883 in South Australia), the first female registered doctor (1890 in Victoria), before women achieved the vote (1894 in South Australia), and the first women entered parliament (1921 in Western Australia).

Another key social issue in Australia in the late nineteenth century was religion. Roman Catholics and Protestant dissenters had been barred from the older universities of Oxford and Cambridge in Great Britain, and many of the earliest immigrants to Australia were Irish Catholics seeking to escape religious persecution. Educational secularism was, therefore, a live political issue in the Australian colonies. Prohibitions on religious tests were incorporated into the Acts of the Universities of Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Queensland. Again, the position taken by the universities drew both on principles of the Enlightenment and late modernity. In the case of the former, secularity was a matter of philosophical principle. In regard to the latter, it was an acknowledgement that an institution underwritten by taxpayers of all denominations could not be seen to favour a particular religious viewpoint. In the words of Charles Nicholson, the Vice Provost of the University of Sydney, to do otherwise 'would be totally inconsistent with the spirit of an institution established and maintained from public funds' (Nicholson, as quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald, 1852, p. 2).

There is evidence that religious-blind admission processes succeeded, to a degree. Using student records, researchers Julia Horne and Geoffrey Sherington determined the religious background of students attending the University of Sydney between 1852 and 1861 (Horne & Sherington, 2010). Anglican students dominated; however, there were significant numbers of Roman Catholics and Presbyterians, with relatively small proportions of other religions and denominations. Horne and Sherington argue this indicated a student body with a fair degree of religious diversity. However, the diversity of the student body has to be understood in the context of the wider community that it served. In NSW, censuses were conducted in 1851 and 1861 and each recorded the religious background of the participants. Comparisons therefore can be made, though with some caveats. First, the student population, relative to the population of the colony, was small, increasing the likelihood of statistical anomalies. Second, the relatively high percentage of students with an indeterminate religious affiliation (one in eight) complicates the findings. Third, Horne and Sherington's analysis aggregated a decade's worth of student populations, at a time when the population of the colony was exploding and its social and religious composition changing markedly. Between the 1851 and 1861 censuses of the colony its population more than doubled; the proportion of colonists identifying as Presbyterian trebled, whilst the Anglican and Roman Catholic percentages

reduced significantly (as per censuses published in Illawarra Mercury, 1862; Sydney Morning Herald, 1851). These records suggest that Roman Catholics may have been under-represented in the student population, being between 24.9 and 30.4% of the colony's population but only 19% of the university's. Conversely, Presbyterian students may have been over-represented, at least in the earliest years of the university; being 16% of students but only 9.7% of the colony in 1851. There also appears some correlation between religious affiliation and social class, since the Roman Catholic population of NSW at the time was mostly workingclass, whereas a greater proportion of Presbyterians came from upper-middle class backgrounds (e.g., Hillis, 1981; Jupp, 2009). Therefore, whilst Horne and Sherington's analysis reveals some evidence of widening participation, it also indicates persistent exclusion.

Another source of data from which one can examine the issue of religion is the matriculation database held by the University of Melbourne. The database records, amongst other details, the religious denominations of all those who sat the University Matriculation Examination, as a prerequisite to gaining admission. Between 1855 and 1880, almost 5000 aspirants sat examinations. When compared to the colony's censuses in the same period, a pattern appears that is similar to that of the University of Sydney, insofar as Roman Catholics were again under-represented and Protestants over-represented (Office of the Government Statis, 1883; University of Melbourne, 1855–1901). Here, too, religious exclusion was also associated with economic exclusion.

Social justice and participation were therefore framed not only in terms of an individual's inalienable right to a higher education, but also what they would do for their country, with that education. Inclusion was thus understood by some as a matter of social justice, but for others, social responsibility. Thus, who should benefit from higher education depended, in part, with how social justice was conceptualised by the enabler. Consequently, the clash between Enlightenment and late-modernist values created something more complicated than a binary divide between educational democrats and traditional elitists. Determinations of the purpose of higher education, and who should participate, were driven as much by ideological frameworks as they were the social background of the protagonist. For example, in his examination of the formation of the University of Melbourne, Foley (1998) observes that both liberals and vocationalists had a common aim to widen participation, seeing education as the right of all men, regardless of the class or status of the person. Where they differed, however, was that liberals championed the moral cause of education and were more likely to see the state-building role of the university as the provision of statesmen and civil servants. In contrast, the vocationalists focused squarely on utility, arguing that the young colony needed individuals trained in applied science, technology and the professions (Foley, 1998).

Conclusion

Despite the rhetoric of ivory towers, Australian universities have never been disconnected from the communities within which they exist. In order to secure the 'state's bounty,' they have had to be receptive to the concerns and goals of the wider population, insofar as they have been refracted through democratic elective processes and public policy formulation. The historical record shows that, at times and for some within higher education, the social contract has not been entered into willingly and has even been viewed as anathematic to the real purpose of a university. In their 1968 study, Gross and Grambsch drew a

distinction between 'elitist' higher education goals, such as scholarship, prestige, and scientific enquiry, and 'service' goals, most notably community service and external stakeholder satisfaction. This study demonstrates that the distinction has existed in the antipodean model of higher education for more than a century. This research also indicates that within higher education institutions, there appears to be greater congruence around the pursuit of elitist goals than there is for service ones. From this, it would be possible to agree with Bourdieu's contention that elitism in higher education is a defining element of its habitus; or as Simon Marginson describes in more neutral terms, that what distinguishes higher education from other social formations are the credentialing of knowledge-intensive labour, and basic research (Marginson, 2008). It would therefore be understandable that some might conclude that service goals are taken to be lower-order than elitist ones in higher education.

However, the historical record demonstrates that such a conclusion would be an oversimplification. Service goals have been, literally, written into the acts that founded Australia's first universities and have, therefore, figuratively, been written into their DNA. Service goals have been an inescapable reality in higher education from the moment Australia's first university was created and despite regular resistance, this reality has never been seriously challenged from within the sector. Rather, it has been the specific nature of higher education organisational culture that has created tensions and conflicts between how that social contract has been interpreted and realised. The self-reproducing and knowledge-forming nature of higher education institutions allow its constituent inhabitants to practice a diverse range of values and ethical regimes that reflect the similarly diverse nature of the communities they serve (Marginson, 2007). Universities allow individual agents a great deal of autonomy in how they engage in their labour, compared to other institutions, both public and private. Consequently, as the values of a university are contested, compartmentalised and negotiated from within (Bayenet, Feola, & Tavernier, 2000), so too is its very purpose. This is not to say that Australian universities do not aspire towards some meta-idea of institutional purpose; they are, after all, part of a global community with shared values. But these values – particularly, academic freedom and the pursuit of new knowledge – lead to the normative values of higher education itself being challenged.

Aligned with these meta-values has been the more permeable relationship constructed between the Australian university and wider community, compared to that of the English relationship that influenced but did not define the first Australian institutions. The state has created a dynamic whereby universities have sometimes been orthodox followers and at other times at the forefront of social change. This is because, paradoxically, if they are continually at the forefront then they are, potentially, abrogating their responsibility to reflect the current values of the society they serve; however, their continual search for new knowledge and understanding means that they will, at times, be required to push for those values to change. The problem, however, is that those agents constructing new understandings are not always 'exceptions to their own analyses' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 4), since they are also a function of the state, which teaches at a much earlier stage what to value and trust. It is for this reason that scientific enquiry at times reinforces existing prejudice rather than exposing it. It is also the reason why some in power inside universities have allowed their prejudices to influence discriminatory admission policies, whilst others continue to champion for radical change.

Embracing both its monastic past and a more entrepreneurial present, the modern university chooses for itself 'a mixed history of medieval authority and modern science' (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p. 1) in order to define an identity. This identity is shaped, to a large extent, on the institutions' only partially successful attempts towards the two distinct, but related, syntheses, discussed in this article. The first was the need to integrate Enlightenment views of the search for knowledge with modernistic principles of scientific purpose. The second was the need to be both champions and challengers of social norms, to fulfil their social contract. The evidence is that the nature of the social contract between university and state has never been stable, and a true synthesis of these conflicting priorities is unlikely to ever be realised.

Note

1. The letter was signed 'C. MELBOURNE', however the author was identified as the Archbishop of Melbourne in Selleck (2003).

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