

**The subversion of
Australian universities**

edited by

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Preface

The theme of this book is that Australian universities have become subverted and that this is a catastrophe for society. The traditional university is the only institution in society that is dedicated, through research and teaching, to the creation, maintenance, and propagation of knowledge in the basic disciplines. Such knowledge, and its continuing development, is vital for a civilised society, not only for “cultural”, but for very pragmatic, technological reasons.

This vision of the role of universities has in recently been seriously diminished by policy-makers and by senior university administrators alike, to the point where the proper function of universities in Australia has become distorted, their very existence in danger. The reasons why this is so are explored in depth in the pages that follow.

The facts are that in ten years, public spending on universities has been cut savagely. Academic staff now have to cope with much larger classes than previously, while the students they teach are more varied in age, background, and academic commitment. Staff are required to teach in areas new to them, while at the same time they are pressured to publish more, to bring in research monies, and to undertake more administration and committee work. Most are seriously stressed.

In the institutions that currently call themselves universities, knowledge is only to be pursued if it is valuable in the meanly focused sense that it makes money. Research and teaching are valued to the extent that a price in dollars can be put upon these once intrinsically valued activities. Market forces determine what is to be researched, and what is to be taught. Today’s climate of economic rationalism requires top-down management to enforce decisions and procedures that maximise economic gain to the virtual the exclusion of all else.

Disappointingly few other books have addressed these issues. One that has is Tony Coady’s edited collection, *Why universities matter* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000). Our concern here is to appraise current events in an historical context. One of the defining moments in the history of universities in this country was the case of Orr versus the University of Tasmania. This battle, emerging in the 1950s in Australia’s smallest state and most struggling university, addressed many of the basic issues that now need redefining in Australia’s tertiary system: adequate public finance, self-government in academic

matters, the conflicting demands of research and teaching, tenure of staff, and an acceptable teaching and physical environment.

The man held responsible for drawing unwanted public attention to these issues, the result of which was the 1955 Royal Commission on the University of Tasmania, was Sydney Orr, Professor of Philosophy at that university. Within months of the appearance of the Royal Commission's very critical report on the university, Orr was summarily dismissed on the grounds that he had seduced a student. The fall-out, both from the Orr Case and from the Royal Commission itself, was considerable, and without doubt complemented and reinforced the recommendations and subsequent implementation of the 1957 Murray Committee's report on Australian universities.

The Murray Committee ushered in a new age. Academic institutions in the next two decades experienced adequate funding for the first time. Staff were adequately paid; research opportunities grew; students were taught in smaller classes; academic self-government and democratisation appeared; Australian scholars and graduates abandoned the cultural cringe, which hitherto had accepted the automatic superiority of British and American institutions.

In fact, they became too smug. By the mid-1980s and increasingly thereafter, the pendulum swung the other way under the influence of market economics and managerialism, and many were delighted from both the left and the right to use the ideology of economic rationalism to put the universities back in their box. In this climate, the Orr Case took on quite a different significance. Cassandra Pybus reduced the issue to sordid sexual exploitation, as signalled in the way she luridly entitled a reprint of her book on Orr: *Seduction and Consent: A Case of Gross Moral Turpitude*. The raft of academic issues, which had preceded the peremptory sacking of an academic whistleblower, she rejected as completely irrelevant. Orr had had a sexual liaison with a student. His emphatic denials notwithstanding, that was all that needed to be said in the political correctness of the 1990s. But she said more. By including her own sexual romps with staff at Sydney University, she created an impression that universities were fleshpots of general academic decadence and debauchery. Heavy-handed government intervention was needed; the subversion of the universities' true function by economic rationalism had become that much easier. The publicity accorded to Pybus as a speaker on

academic issues not only inhibited serious considerations of the link between the academic issues of the 1950s and those at the end of the 20th century, but distorted public perceptions of the academic function, the nature of tenure, and of sexual harassment itself.

It is easy to say that what has happened is that universities are simply being transformed to meet the needs of the post-industrial world. In 1988, when Education Minister John Dawkins published his Green Paper on higher education, an entirely new era had been opened. Whatever universities and colleges of advanced education had been in the past, from now on all were essentially institutions for vocational training, with a minor research and development function to be supported wherever possible from the private sector. Increasingly, under the Howard Government and formalised in the West Report, universities were to become self-funding, like any other industry. Fee paying students were the customers and market forces would take care of quality control. Information technology now exists so that universities can compete on a global network, so market forces are not even national but international.

In a complex world, change is always inevitable. However, we disagree profoundly that what has happened to our universities is either inevitable or desirable. In this volume, we seek to show how the recent past is not a foreign country, but is intimately related to the present. We look at examples of the unacceptable consequences when market principles are applied to academic life. If we are really to understand what is happening to our universities, and are not simply to be swept along with glib assertions that they too are inevitably part of globalisation, we need to understand the nature, values, and function of universities, and how they too have been degraded in the past just as now they are being degraded in the present.

John Biggs and Richard Davis, Hobart, Tasmania
October, 2001

The contributors

Bob Bessant has been researching Australian higher education for 20 years with particular emphasis on history and administration. He recently participated in an ARC project on changes to universities since 1988. He is a retired Reader from La Trobe University.

John Biggs majored in philosophy and psychology from the University of Tasmania in 1956, where he was a student of Sydney Orr. His special interest is in student learning and teaching in higher education, and has written extensively in these and related areas. He has held Chairs in Education in the Universities of Alberta, Newcastle and Hong Kong. He is now retired and living back in Tasmania.

William Bostock is currently Senior Lecturer in Government at the University of Tasmania. He has studied and taught at universities in Australia, UK and France, and has published a number of papers on higher education policy and practice in refereed journals. His current research concerns the problem of the electronic archiving of official documents.

Richard Davis is an emeritus professor of History at the University of Tasmania and a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. Amongst other works he has published the centenary history of the University of Tasmania, *Open to Talent*. See <http://www.asauthors.org/cgi-bin/asadb.pl?what=contacts&member=7520062> for further information on relevant writings.

Robin Gwynn is a historian, author of six books, including *Huguenot Heritage* (Routledge, 1985; second revised edition, Sussex Academic Press, 2001), and of many articles focussing on the Huguenot refugees. Between 1969 and 1996 he was lecturer, reader and associate professor at Massey University. He left Massey to seek ways of opposing the damage being done to tertiary education, and has since twice stood as parliamentary candidate for the Alliance Party. This contribution is a slightly adapted version of his valedictory lecture, which was given a standing ovation by his colleagues.

Brian Martin is associate professor in Science, Technology and Society at the University of Wollongong. He has studied suppression of dissent, including many academic cases, for over 20 years, and is currently international director of Whistleblowers Australia. He is author of ten books and 200 articles in a variety of fields. For further information see <http://www.bmartin.cc/>.

Philippa Martyr left Western Australia in 1995 and, armed only with a PhD in history, set out to seek her fortune (as befits the descendent of a long line of strong-minded females). She became a lecturer at the Tasmanian School of Nursing, and then in 2001 was a Visiting Scholar in the School of Humanities, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford. She has also been a Research Fellow at the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, University of East Anglia, Norwich. She is a specialist in the histories of medicine and health care, enjoys going to church, and in her spare time writes powerful but unpublishable novels.

Robert Solomon was closely involved in the aftermath of Orr's dismissal, first as a member of the Staff Association's executive, then (1961-1963) as the sub-professorial representative on the Council of the University of Tasmania. Historian George Wilson and geographer Solomon prepared the appeal to the Governor as Visitor, and Solomon was vitally involved in the staff tenure regulations following the Visitation. His and John Polya's inside account of the Orr Case was published as *Dreyfus in Australia* in 1996.

Peter Tregear has recently been appointed to a Lecturership in Music at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. He has previously taught at the Universities of Melbourne and Queensland. Research interests include music sociology and early twentieth-century opera and music theatre; his centennial history of the Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne, was published in 1997. Peter was a resident student at Ormond College between 1990-1992.