

## RESEARCH PAPER 36: INSIDE THE WHALE

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Get inside the whale. Give yourself over to the world-process, stop fighting against it or pretending you can control it; simply accept it, endure it, record it.

This is a quotation from 'Inside the Whale', a famous extended essay by George Orwell, railing against Henry Miller's refusal to engage with political topics. I am not going to talk about this any further at this stage.

Instead I draw some inspiration from a book and then an oral history given the same title, based on personal reflections about their field-work experience from eminent Australian social scientists. This was edited by Colin Bell and Sol Encel.<sup>1</sup> It appears that the women have been the stronger survivors, including Eva Cox, Bettina Cass and Lois Bryson. Certainly Hugh Stretton recently left a big gap in the list.

I am clearly not in the same league as the authors of the ten chapters. But like them I want to use the same introspective technique to identify some lessons or even just "cautionary tales" about the politics of tertiary education which I can glean from an eccentric career spent mainly in eastern Australia.

You did not need to be an eminent sociologist to note the intimate scale of Tasmanian social networks. Sixty years ago I qualified for entry to UTas and a year later I applied for a Commonwealth scholarship to help me fund attendance and cover fees.

My first exposure to the politics of higher education occurred even before I had left school, when I read about the dismissal of a professor of philosophy on the grounds of sexual misconduct. The student concerned was the daughter of a member of the university council. It turned out I had played in school-age tennis tournaments against her brother. After I finally enrolled at the Domain in 1957, I later found myself playing competitive badminton with her former boyfriend and competitive football with student union activists defending the aforesaid professor.

By then, (1) the Murray Report had been published with its damning condemnation of the quality of my alma mater and (2) Australian academic philosophers were being mobilized to condemn the conduct of the university's decision-making structures leading to Professor Orr's dismissal.<sup>2</sup>

The Orr case rolled on throughout my UTas years, engaging some of the best and brightest of the student body and dividing opinions among staff. It even followed me to Oxford. Rhodes Scholar applicants at that time were expected to profess their enthusiasm for experiencing undergraduate life (and there was an unstated assumption that colonials might battle to meet the standard for anything advanced). Given my eccentric mix of majors – politics, public administration and ancient history – PPE was all that was on offer. Being innumerate placed significant barriers for both

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<sup>1</sup> *Inside the whale : ten personal accounts of social research*, edited by Colin Bell and S. Encel, Oxford UP, 1978, reissued as a sound recording in 1984.

<sup>2</sup> *Orr*, by W H C Eddy, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961; *Gross Moral Turpitude*, by Cassie Pybus, Heinemann, 1993.

introductory courses - micro-economics and the prevailing fashion of symbolic logic. I was rescued by an extended interview with Sir Isaiah (later Lord) Berlin. He interrogated me at length about the Orr case before agreeing with my main proposition that I had no hope of passing undergraduate philosophy and that it was not my fault. He graciously acceded to my request to move instead to the much softer option an advanced political science degree.

The significance of individual personalities was a recurrent theme during my career in education, pushing me into particular activities (Henry Mayer) or pushing me out of others (Kevin Rudd). It was particularly important when relationships of whole institutions were under stress. Local historians might reflect on the leadership cadre in the Launceston base of the TCAE and its confected hostility towards southerners

The importance of personalities was clearly apparent in the stormy period of ACT amalgamation discussion directly involving the ANU, the Canberra CAE, and the School of the Arts (a grouping of pre-existing music and arts institutions) and indirectly involving the TAFE institutions, UNSW-Dunroon, the Catholic University and the wild-card I played, Monash University. For example, would the School of the Arts have disappeared seamlessly into the maw of the ANU if it had not been headed by Peter Karmel, former VC of the ANU? Or would CCAE have been sponsored to independent university status if Mal Logan, VC of Monash, had not been predisposed to help because of his personal alienation from the ANU?

Personalities have also mattered in more recent years, as those following the travails of the University of Queensland will be aware. My general observation is that outstanding scholarly merit or an ability to command the loyalty of academic staff is no longer as significant as managerial and financial capability. Gratifyingly the University of Canberra has stood out against the tide in this regard, which may explain its continuing role as a maverick within the conclave of vice chancellors. But its VC is retiring in the middle of next year and I will follow with interest the processes and outcomes of his replacement.

What is clear from other examples is that universities are seen by their managers, governing boards and by funding authorities as 'big businesses' which function in a highly competitive environment. Managers of these billion dollars of assets and income need to demonstrate capacities for management that were once rarely acquired alongside advancement up the rest of the academic ladder.

However the devolution of budget responsibility and the vast scale of research grants, especially in science-related areas, provides opportunities for acquiring financial skills – and vice-chancellors and their deputies can also be sourced outside universities, not only the private sector but also the defence forces and government administration. Two of my senior colleagues in the Queensland Goss government went on to highly successful careers as vice-chancellors, although they had previous experience inside universities before their engagement with government. One consequence of the requirement for financial and strategic management skills is the expectation of salaries comparable to the private sector, rather than a loading of a fixed percentage above standard professorial rates, which prevailed in earlier times. Million dollar salaries are now commonplace, even among relatively mediocre institutions.

I will pass over lightly the initial three appointments I held after leaving Oxford except to note the significance in general terms of the politics of higher education, viewed from below.

At the **University of East Africa** in Kampala, there was the stimulation of post-colonial nation-building and the capacity to attract staff of high quality from around the world to participate in the enterprise. At the tender age of 24, I found myself serving on a national minimum wages enquiry as the statutory "academic" and token European. Sadly the universal phenomenon of every community lusting after its very own university campus applied as much in Dar-es-Salaam as it does in Burnie.

This was brought home to me most strongly in the era of escalating numbers of colleges of advanced education and then the fall-out of amalgamations within colleges and between colleges and compliant universities.

Recent discussions aimed at creating an imitation of a free market have also generated policy communities in regional areas, where local politicians have combined with local university leaders to resist the encroachment of the major providers in each state. This resistance to change was rendered more potent because of the presence in government of a National Party whose reason for being was to resist the effects of urbanization and maintain local power structures. This clashed with the ideological preference of a Liberal Party committed to reducing the role and penetration of centralized bureaucracies.

At **Sydney University**, I observed the external stresses created by unmanageable demand - over 700 in my first year classes – and the internal stresses caused by ideological disputes associated with political economy and by challenges offered to the absolute authority of god professors by a trend to collegial decision-making. Michael Hogan, a contemporary of mine at Sydney, has written extensively about this period of history in the Department of Government.<sup>3</sup> When I made it to Professor myself, the tension between professorial and collegial imperatives became a major issue of contention, as discussed below.

But the question of student demand and the costs of seeking to meet that demand remains a live issue. The federal government has clearly decided that their reading of the collective will of taxpayers (or of the business interests they represent) is that university education is no longer automatically viewed as a desirable aspiration.

In Sydney and nationally in the 1960s, the response to escalating demand was to create more institutions which would aspire to the quality and cost-structure of conventional universities. So some of those 700 in my class could be siphoned off by the creation of Macquarie University among the leafy northern suburbs where many of them lived, or by diverting them south by transforming the 'Tech at Kenso' into the University of New South Wales. The final stage in meeting demand was to beef up existing institutions which had much lower unit costs and staff without academic pretensions as 'separate but equal' colleges which would be required to move from single-purpose to multi-purpose to qualify for federal funding. All of this happened while I was back again on the other side of the earth.

The issue has now surfaced as part of an economy drive to shift the cost burden from the national government and taxpayers generally towards the students visualized as customers/consumers. The Dawkins reforms started this trend, with HECS and the aggressive marketing of courses to overseas students and even offering them at overseas campuses. The University of Queensland has been one of the most successful in this area, with the VC this month reporting to a lunch of emeriti that 25% of UQ's total income now derived from this activity – and the figures for Melbourne University was even higher, around 35%.

The problem for the current government is that, while delighted to see overseas customers arriving in large numbers, it believes that too many locals are also arriving and are effectively being subsidized from other sources. The conventional wisdom is that the HECS scheme sends only a weak market signal to potential non-affluent consumers by shifting the impact of costs to a future well beyond their present enthusiasm for acquiring a university degree and living a student life.

**The Queen's University of Belfast** was the only educational institution at any level in the province of Northern Ireland where student populations were not segregated by their religious upbringing. Teaching there, I witnessed first hand the struggle between a non-sectarian student grouping, "People's Democracy" and the traditional hostilities which played out in bloody confrontations inside and outside the campus. I saw this up close and personal, helping to supervise a thesis by one of our young tutors who was engaging in a study of participant observation.<sup>4</sup> He went on to a highly distinguished career in the forefront of studying and practicing conflict management. The fire-bombing of the staff club was a salutary lesson in the limits of rationality and confidence about the civilizing effect of higher education in a hostile political environment.

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<sup>3</sup> *Cradle of Australian Political Studies : Sydney's Department of Government*, by Michael Hogan, Connor Court Publishing, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> *The People's Democracy 1968-1973*, by Paul Arthur, Blackstaff Press, 1974

Up to this point in my career, I was essentially a spectator of the tertiary scene I became more directly engaged with the politics of higher education in my next appointment as I added administrative responsibilities to my teaching.

As a Principal Lecturer at the Canberra College of Advanced Education in the Whitlam era, I experienced the flourishing of the binary system which was designed to sweep up existing State-funded organisations focused on technical education and later teacher training into a co-ordinated structure. The Canberra version was a stand-alone model newly created, in which the TAFE sector remained separate and distinct.

Founded in 1967 under the active patronage of John Gorton, CCAE had been accredited to offer degrees as well as diplomas by the time I arrived in 1972. The institutional ethos was summed up in the phrase 'Parity of Esteem'. This phrase was used as the title of the book from an early Principal, Sam Richardson, who had come to Canberra via colonial roots not unlike my own - but at greater heights, as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mauritius.<sup>5</sup> The CCAE as a new institution was able to pursue this policy aggressively because of its access to staff from within the university sector looking for more rapid advancement or re-location. I fell into both categories - looking for advancement beyond Lecturer after seven years and looking for relocation from the fraught environment of Belfast at the height of one of its iterations of 'the troubles'. Unlike other colleges, there was no "dead wood" of staff carried across from an earlier era who focussed only on technical training and struggled with the idea of research promoted by their peers.

There were several cross-cutting tensions in the pursuit of parity of esteem linked to the priority of teaching over research and the offering of explicitly vocational preparation rather than more liberal and generic purposes for tertiary education. How could courses in journalism, librarianship, nursing or teacher training match the esteem of 'real university' courses available on the other side of Black Mountain? Could the practice of 'management' be separated out from its academic underpinnings in economics, accounting, law, psychology and even political science?

Fifty years on, this seems a quaint debate when universities have embraced vocationalism so strongly in every aspect of their activities and defenders of 'education for its own sake' are very thin on the ground. Even in the 1970's, the fallacy was obvious to observers not intent on defending their patch of academic turf - Australian universities had started life as vocational, preparing lawyers, doctors and clergymen for the colonial workplace.

But the debate is not without contemporary relevance as a new 'third force' of the TAFE sector presses for its own version of parity of esteem represented by its claim to award its own degrees. If plumbers earn more than philosophers or school teachers, why shouldn't the ever-expanding technological requirements for qualification be recognized by degree status?

The CCAE also was caught up in the higher education politics of status. State governments were quick to seize on the financial and political benefits of creating Colleges from pre-existing institutions such as teachers colleges, art colleges and music conservatoriums and schools of mines. The federal government offered financial incentives as well as recognition through a central council, seen as a less costly alternative to the creation of new universities which had been the first response to the explosion of demand I had experienced in Sydney in the late 1960s.

But returning to my Orwellian opening, were all CAE's equal or were some like the pigs in *Animal Farm* more equal than others? Canberra CAE was desperate to be counted among the pigs of the large city-centre institutions like RMIT and QIT rather than the lesser breeds of city teachers colleges and regional institutions in places like Wagga and Rockhampton. There is an echo here of the scrambling for membership of status hierarchies when the whole CAE sector disappeared as a result of the impact of the Dawkins reforms in the early 1990s.

I experienced the earlier stages of this process during the 1980s. I had created some internal dissent in 1977 when I moved up the Orwellian hierarchy by acquiring the unique distinction of

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<sup>5</sup> *Parity of Esteem - Canberra College of Advanced Education 1968-1978*, by S S Richardson, Canberra CAE, 1979.

promotion from a CAE into a university chair – in this case, the J D Story Chair of Public Administration at the University of Queensland. In *Animal Farm* terms, I had joined the farmers, but they were not pleased to see me. I must have still looked like a pig. A majority of my future colleagues passed a motion of dissent from the decision of the selection committee, threatening to send me to Coventry if I persisted. The disappointed internal candidate delayed the outcome by an appeal to the State Ombudsman. I even sensed that VC Zelman Cowan hoped I might be discouraged enough to go away but in the end he held firm against the growing tide of collegial activism, ably supported by one Peter Boyce.

The unanticipated consequence of my elevation was widespread recognition among the College sector in several states that I might be useful to them. I could add credibility to colleges' internal management arrangements and to external assessment panels reporting to the State co-ordinating authorities that had sprung into being to manage this new sector. Here the politics related to the requirement from the Commonwealth that CAE's would only be funded if they were wider in range of disciplines than their precursors. There was thus potential for grouping together unlike institutions previously specializing in mining or agriculture or teaching training so they could meet external expectations of being truly multi-purpose and multi-disciplinary. Management education and liberal studies were often the cheap alternatives.

A recurrent issue, still alive within the current university sector, related to the tension between essentially teaching purposes of the institution and the aspirations of its academic staff. Many staff had joined the prior institution as teaching specialists, appointed for their demonstrated competence in meeting their students' technical and professional needs. In the competition for advancement or even tenure, these 'old stagers' faced products of universities who held superior academic qualifications and measured their own future in terms of research accomplishments. They saw College positions as a necessary step towards a different goal.

College managers at the time – like contemporary vice-chancellors – tended to compete for positions in their own pecking order by demonstrating the quality of research collectively produced. Both groups were pre-disposed to relegate the teaching of local undergraduates to the bottom of the priority list, behind research, postgraduate awards and especially the benefits of disposable income through attracting overseas students. In the current climate, this has resulted in the core undergraduate teaching being assigned to marginal participants in the 'industry'. There are many reports suggesting that over half of undergraduate students are now taught by non-tenured and sessional staff. If resources are freed up, they are then diverted to either appointing more senior staff to boost the research profile or to buy out of teaching the tenured staff working their way up the hierarchy.

Another change which mimics current trends was for college curricula to be expanded and broadened – partly to meet the expectations of international students. In the current environment this has meant a move away from a core curriculum focused on local issues and a lack of engagement by staff and thus students with the local community. Many universities – including some of high prestige with which I am familiar – barely mention national political institutions, let alone the government of the states in which they are located. I have spoken about this last week at the national gathering of political scientists.<sup>6</sup>

The other concern of College managers related to the presumptions about the need for an economic size of student enrolments measured against enthusiasm for many communities to have a campus located in their jurisdiction. This was a particular problem in Queensland, where state governments had sprinkled teachers colleges, agricultural colleges, schools of mines and schools of arts to bolster the standing of local members of the dominant National(=Country) Party.

Various solutions have emerged, which have then carried over to the new universities which progressively replaced Colleges during the early 1990s. By then, as Director-General of Education, I sat on the University of Queensland as one of the representatives of the state Government and also witnessed events through my loose connection with the Office of Higher

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<sup>6</sup> 'Forty Years On From the 1975 APSA Conference - Academic Engagement with Government', paper at the 2015 Australian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Canberra.

Education where I was constrained to act in a supporting role to the bevy of Vice Chancellors. There have been some remarkable outcomes which I am sure contrast with the stresses inside such a small state as Tasmania.

Central Queensland University, notionally based in Rockhampton, now has multiple campuses in state capitals as well as other regional centres; the University of the Sunshine Coast gained its autonomy after being an undersized teachers college because the intender partner in the merger, then the QUT, had a VC with a strongly metropolitan focus and would not expand north as expected by the planners; the University of Queensland did expand west, held on to the Gatton agricultural campus as part of the deal but later handed on the Ipswich campus to the University of Southern Queensland, which also relieved the University of the Sunshine Coast of its mini-campus inland from the coast. Only Griffith seems to have derived positive geographic benefit from its ordained move south, where it derived income and status from its quasi-monopoly on the Gold Coast - its challenger there being from across the border, Southern Cross University which was the inheritor of the mantle of the non-amalgamation involving the University of New England.

There was also the intersection of issues between the school system, the TAFE system (in my time in a separate government department from schools) and the mechanism for entrance to post-school institutions. Queensland stood out against the trend towards external examinations until very recently and only moved when it also moved to line up with other states in the number of mandatory years of secondary schooling. School-based assessment had come about in the 1980's in response to the stranglehold that the University of Queensland had exercised over the schools via its entry examinations. The system required co-ordination through a separate authority on which all relevant groups were represented.

The one group initially not represented were the TAFE institutions, linked instead to coordinating bodies containing representatives of unions and employer groups concerned about assuring the quality of the apprenticeship system organically connected to TAFE awards.

However the border between TAFE and other providers of higher education were being blurred with the entry into the field of private sector providers. The consequences of that national decision are still with us. These providers often started life as either secretarial colleges or offering English-language courses for overseas students. The market expanded as both state and federal governments saw the benefit of an inexpensive and vocationally-focussed alternative to universities and private entrepreneurs saw a way of extracting both fees from students and subsidies from governments. 'Parity of esteem' arguments pointed to some need for quality assurance mechanisms via state registration. This in turn allowed immigration authorities to permit overseas students to use their fees in effect to buy their access to residential status.

Over time TAFE institutions have built on this state sponsorship to advance claims to similar fee-help arrangements to universities and, almost inevitably, to seek to have the highest end of their academic award spectrum to be accorded the status of degrees. There may also be a drift towards a stronger academic base for the qualifications of TAFE teachers and a danger of the 'intellectualising' the courses that are offered.

During my time as Director-General and thereafter, other institutions came calling, seeking state endorsement of their claim to award university qualifications. However the potential flood seems to have slowed to a trickle in the face of resistance from the established universities. Bond University remains the most prominent survivor, even if its now-deceased founder faded from the scene and into prison. The successor management team had a love-hate relationship with the University of Queensland, which maintains an interest in the real estate. Bond was able to use personal and political connection to secure its own Act of Parliament which effectively excluded the Education Department from meddling in its affairs.

Two other institutions absorbed more of my time, then and later, because of the requirement for state registration for any tertiary award. Both were concerned with religion. The first was the Christian Heritage College in suburban Brisbane, which was accredited to award its first degree (in teacher training) in 1990 and has since moved up the hierarchy to Masters degrees in a wide range of disciplines, such as Management, Counselling and Social Science. This foundation had

been facilitated in the Bjelke Petersen era by provision of a lavish land grant and had curriculum links originally with similar institutions on the west coast of the USA.

The second was the Brisbane College of Theology, an ambitious project with an ecumenical focus which brought together various small components offering theological education and training. It comprised St Francis' Theological College (Anglican), St Paul's Theological College (Roman Catholic), (formerly under the operations of the Pius XII Seminary), and Trinity Theological College (Uniting). The college offered both under-graduate and post-graduate qualifications with quality assurance provided through Griffith University. It ceased operations as an umbrella organisation for the three colleges in 2009, in part due to the administrative overheads involved in running a small tertiary institution in the Australian higher education system. St Francis' Theological College now runs its programs as part of Charles Sturt University, while Trinity and St Paul's run their programs through the Australian Catholic University

Both these experiences offered me blasts from my student days, when the biggest and most stimulating debates occurred between the Student Christian Movement and the Newman Society, when Anzac Day was a source of discord rather than a glorification of war and when attendance at chapel was compulsory for the inmates of Christ College. Without embracing anyone's faith, I had learnt enough of the language and jargon to hold my own in the interminable negotiations, which were often a microcosm of the arguments about the role of non-state schools alongside a secular education system.

I stopped being Director-General in 1994, encouraged on my way by my fellow Director-General in the Office of the Cabinet (one K Rudd) and rescued by a visiting appointment at Griffith. As QUT Dean of Arts, I was then thrown headlong into the debate over the purposes of universities, the role of vocationalism and the priorities accorded university teaching relative to research. Should a BA exist as a collection of liberal studies independent of its vocational purposes – for social workers, counsellors, teachers, practitioners of the visual and performing arts and journalists?

The question was given particular point by locating the Office of the Dean on a distant suburban campus, where courses in some but not the latter two of these vocational courses were offered. The strategic question had to be asked – how important politically was the need to occupy the land generously allocated by the state government? The tactical question was how to package course offerings to attract quality students. In the end, the attraction of city lights to overseas but also local students answered the strategic question. Like Idi Amin aspiring to be the Last King of Scotland, I succeeded in being the Last Dean of Arts at QUT. The social science courses were distributed into other faculties and the high-profile courses in journalism and the visual and performing arts became the 'Faculty of Creative Industries'.

My engagement with the politics of higher education did not end with my relinquishment of full-time employment in 2001. But I have moved on from being inside the biblical whale - from Jonah to Jeremiah perhaps.

On Friday, I have accepted an invitation to talk about my renaissance as a director of a think tank. This will occur at a gathering in Richmond organized by friends from UTas days - an Old Nick chorus girl and a speedy winger in the football team, better known now as Margaret and Henry Reynolds.

Let me conclude by reminding you of the themes identified in passing during my odyssey, to invite you to see if there is any resonance with Tasmania:

- the accidental effect of personalities
- university management and the business model
- the impact of changing demand for university study
- the politics of campus location
- vocational institutions as alternatives
- teaching, research and institutional status
- liberal education and the world of work
- private institutions and privatization

There is a ninth theme, which I pursue elsewhere – the moral obligation on academics, especially social scientists, to engage with the wider community within which universities function. Think tanks offer one vehicle for such engagement.

Some theologians will argue that Orwell – and thus Bell and Encel - were misinterpreting the miracle tale of Jonah. For the social scientists, the whale was a metaphor for the wider society. But both the Bible and the Qur'an see it differently:

Jonah was commanded by God to go to the city of Nineveh to prophesy against it 'for their great wickedness is come up before me'. Jonah instead sought to flee from 'the presence of the Lord' by going to Jaffa and he was swallowed during the voyage.

The Qur'an reports that 'had it not been that Jonah repented and glorified Allah, he would certainly have remained inside the fish until the day of resurrection'.

So perhaps the Whale is more accurately identified with the university, a hiding place for those unwilling to prophesy against the great wickedness of the wider society. And the new tenure arrangements for professors, certainly in Queensland, means there is significant material reward for waiting until this day of resurrection.