

Market Logic, Corporate Language, and the University of Queensland

How UQ's most powerful people talk about our education and why it matters

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Recently I attended the UQ Union's "Expert Panel on Higher Education", tasked with discussing the Coalition's proposed reforms to Higher Education. Among other things, the deregulation of fees, higher interest rates on HECS and lower government contributions featured prominently in the panel's various discussions and debates. This is of course with good reason; much has already been written in *Semper* (and other media) about the disastrous effects these three proposals will have on Higher Education in Australia.

However, while the debate generally presented the audience with an eclectic mix of views, one thing remained consistent: the language. Regardless of each panellist's position on the government's proposed reforms, they each drew on a relatively limited vocabulary to describe higher education in Australia.

Universities were collectively referred to as a "market" – disagreement sometime ensued over whether panellists thought it was a 'free' market or not. Students were referred to as "consumers" or "customers". A university degree was frequently referred to as a "product" that had varying degrees of "quality". Most tellingly, the value of a degree was more often than not determined by the earning power it produced upon graduation. In other words, the cost of a university degree was the 'cost of investment', while how much you were paid by employers was the 'return' on that investment.

It is at this point worth listing some of the panellists: Professor James Allan - TC Beirne School of Law; , Sharon Bird MP - Shadow Minister for Vocational Education; Professor Paul Frijters - UQ School of Economics, ANU Research School of Social Sciences; Senator Chris Ketter - Senator for Queensland; Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic Professor Joanne Wright - UQ Senior Executive.

Over the past few years, both Labor and Liberal MPs and Ministers have regularly utilised corporate language to expound upon their various (usually ill-thought out) policies on higher education. That the two MPs on the panel (both Labor) used this kind of language is not entirely surprising. The academics' reference to "markets" and "consumers" only demonstrates the pervasive nature of market logic when it comes to higher education – it has even breached the Ivory Tower!

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The person of most interest to me was Professor Joanne Wright. Professor Wright occupies one of the most powerful positions within the University of Queensland. Depending on who you talk to, Professor Wright is considered somewhere in the top three most powerful people at UQ. While the politicians firmly (and dully) parroted the party line, and Professor Allen stuck faithfully to his unique form of neoliberal economics, Professor Wright spoke with a frankness and openness that was both remarkable and refreshing. Here was someone who had real power and influence in the university sector holding no punches, and giving an insight into how the university leadership views the big issues in Australian higher education. Her main message: Universities need more money, and that has to come from either greater government contributions funded by higher taxes, or by forcing students to pay more. Interestingly, her personal preference was for the former.

However, although this message in itself was interesting, I was more intrigued by the way Professor Wright framed the problems in Australian higher education. While she was slightly more reluctant to use corporate language, her reliance on market logic was obvious.

And so, about two hours into the debate, I decided to take the opportunity to ask the person largely responsible for UQ's functioning whether she thought that the use of corporate language and market logic in discussions around higher education had adverse effects on how UQ was run. Specifically, I asked whether its proliferation could explain why the Arts Faculty had suffered such serious funding cuts.

Professor Wright's answer was telling. After a brief pause, her initial answer was "not ... directly", which immediately begs the question, "how about indirectly?". But alas, I wasn't that quick-witted. Instead Wright embarked on a treatise about Arts at UQ that arguably gave a rather important insight into the internal logic used by the most powerful decision-makers in our universities.

"Don't take this wrong way," Professor Wright said, "But Arts students are cheap." That is, in the University's eyes, an Arts degree isn't that expensive to deliver. Indeed, it isn't that expensive to deliver if you regularly cut courses, have huge staff-to-student ratios, and even sometimes scratch whole majors (see Gender Studies). Further to that, Professor Wright pointed out that, "34 of the 100 CEOs in the FTSE 100 companies have history degrees." Here was one of UQ's most powerful decision makers, quite obviously relying on market logic to defend Arts at UQ.

This tendency, of course, isn't unique to UQ. Over the past decade or so, market logic and corporate language have come to dominate most mainstream debates around higher education, both in Australia and other nations such as the United States, England, Chile and Canada.

But why is this a problem? Maybe it isn't so bad that universities are increasingly run like a private business. Well first of all, as Professor Paul Frijters rather pertinently pointed out at the debate, it is regularly forgotten that UQ is a public entity. That is, a long time ago the Queensland Government provided a large, expensive piece of land to a group of people to run a public education institution – not a business.

But perhaps more importantly, market logic and corporate language are changing the very foundations of our perception of 'value', when it comes to higher education. And this, I think, is a big problem.

The University of Queensland's decision to cut funding to the Arts (now Humanities and Social Sciences – HASS) Faculty made perfect sense from their market-based perspective. First of all, demand isn't that high. Second of all, the 'rate of return', on average, isn't that high either. A student is far more likely to earn the big bucks if they study engineering. Finally, because Arts is in the lowest HECS band, the University can't actually charge that much for the degree anyway.

The problem is, it's impossible to value something like an education in history, English literature, or philosophy in monetary terms. Professor Wright's reference to the FTSE 100 was her attempt at that. An Arts education, like all types of education, has intrinsic value. That a market would struggle to value, empathy, imagination or creative thinking, is not an indictment on these qualities. It is a demonstration of the Market's rather severe limitations.

This of course, isn't just a problem for degrees like history. Engineering, physics, medicine, economics and science are affected in different ways. In these fields, the university is interested in directing research funding to financially lucrative areas, as well as styling the structure of their degrees on models that will attract *private* sponsorship and maximise the chance of higher graduate salaries.

It is here that you can identify the biggest problem. Universities, as one Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, are now exclusively interested in the "private use of reason". In other words, universities are interested in solving the problems given to them by the market. "How do we help this company make more money"; "how do we improve the efficiency of this mining process?" etc.

As Zizek says, "what disappears here is the true task of thinking ... to reflect on the very form of these "problems" in the first place, to re-formulate them, to discern the problem in the very way we perceive such problems."

Unless you live in a cave, you have probably noticed the world is in a rather large amount of trouble. So while we struggle to find the answers to all the world's problems, it is probably worth considering that we are asking the wrong questions. Universities are particularly well placed to ask the right ones, but not in their current state. Not until history, philosophy, engineering, science, physics and every other faculty at every university are treated as something other than profitable arms of a university business. Creative thinking, empathy and imagination (amongst others) should not just be fostered in an Arts education, but in engineering and science as well.

Finally, I should say, this is in no way an attack on Professor Wright. On the contrary, she spoke passionately and confidently all night, advocating for a better-funded and more equitable higher education system. Rather, her comments on Arts at UQ pointed to a far greater structural problem. When you have one of the most powerful people at UQ defending an Arts education by using the very logic that values it the least, it suggests that this has become the language (and logic) of Australia's higher education system. As long as we continue to be forced to defend higher education on these terms, we will be fighting a losing battle. Language and logic systems are never neutral, they are themselves political constructs. This particular political construct has completely undermined the very concept of education and its value; in its place has arisen a system dedicated to market-style valuations and the "private use of reason".

The question, of course, is how do we shift the debate? There are various possible solutions. But perhaps it is worth noting that this particular form of market logic and language came to particular prominence as governments began to charge for university education. Perhaps the moment we put a price on our education, something that in itself possess intrinsic value, was the moment that our perception of higher education changed. Perhaps it's time we consider free university education? But that, I think, can wait for another article.