



**Geoffrey C Bolton** May 2002

The title of this talk came to me some months ago when I was listening on ABC radio to my old sparring partner Geoffrey Blainey addressing the Press Club, and thought I heard him use the phrase 'The tyranny of ignorance'. A nice refinement of his original tyranny of distance! I wrote and asked him if I could borrow the phrase for my paper to this conference. He replied that I must have misheard him, as he hadn't used that phrase, though he wished he had; and certainly I should feel free to go ahead and use it. So I did so, and then in the last week, having received Neil McLean's summary and having considered other speeches both here and at last week's Sydney colloquium, I decided that my original paper wouldn't do, and needed re-writing entirely. This is the version you are about to hear. It has been composed in the light of two major statements about the knowledge economy, one from each side in politics: The Australian Labor Party's manifesto '*An Agenda for the Knowledge Nation*' published in July 2001 and the ministerial discussion paper '*Higher Education at the Cross Roads*' published under the authority of Dr Brendan Nelson in April this year.

Although these documents have more in common than one might deduce from their origins they differ in their analysis of the trend of intellectual standards in Australia. In the view of the ALP manifesto Australia is an under performing knowledge nation, investing insufficient resources in research and development, university funding, and environmental management and at risk of declining standards. The Nelson report glances at the assertions that 'aspects of university teaching have got worse' but declares that 'there is no hard evidence that the quality of teaching in public education has actually declined.' By temperament I am always an optimist, but several factors suggest that the lights are turning amber even if our educational progress has not yet ground to a halt. In naming these warning signals I don't wish to be seen as mounting a diatribe against the Howard government. Nearly all the causes for concern had their origin under the previous Labor administrations and almost certainly represent responses to shifting attitudes among the Australian electorate.

So far as tertiary education is concerned the catalyst for change came about halfway through the period of Labor government, between 1987 and 1991, the years when John Dawkins held the Federal education portfolio. In the decade and a half before his reign Labor and Coalition governments alike pursued broadly common policies. The number of universities had apparently stabilised with the opening of Griffith and Murdoch in 1975. Instead growth was directed at the colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology, including a number of more or less successful attempts at mergers. Throughout this period most students paid no tuition fees. Then came Dawkins. I can never think of regime without being reminded of the 18th century historian who wrote '*King George 11 was like a conscientious bull in a china shop.*' For most university academics Dawkins' advent had much the same effect. He deliberately chose not to seek advice from the generation of experienced advisers such as Peter Karmel and Hugh Hudson who had previously influenced the shaping of Federal policy, and instead surrounded himself with new men from the college sector who had axes of their own to grind and were not much concerned about standards of excellence.

Dawkins wished commendably to widen access to tertiary education, but he and his advisers chose the policy of promoting nearly all tertiary institutions to university status with the implicit mandate that they should attempt to provide all the teaching and research functions of the established universities. As the funding of this policy created new financial demands Dawkins introduced the Higher Education Contribution Scheme [HECS] which ensured that henceforth the essential prerequisite for a university education would be a willingness to go into debt. If such a scheme had been in operation in my student days I would probably not be here today, as my family and I could not afford to go into debt. The more courageous youth of our day will no doubt manage to discharge their responsibilities while simultaneously raising children, paying off a mortgage, and moving from short-term contract to short-term contract in the job market. The reaction of my own generation is best summarised by a friend of mine at the University of Western Australia whom I visited in 1989. As we entered the Economics building I commented on the fact that on one of the honour boards - I believe the one commemorating the best first-year student for each year - the name of J S Dawkins had been scratched out. I said I had only seen such a thing once before, and that was at Royal Portora School in Ireland, where the name of Oscar Wilde had been even more thoroughly expunged from the honour board. At this my friend replied 'Ah yes, but Oscar Wilde only buggered Lord Alfred Douglas.'

At the same time as Dawkins was transforming tertiary education the Commonwealth government was also commissioning the Hilmer report on competition policy, as a result of which competition policy was introduced to many aspects of public life, sometimes quite indiscriminately. I shall have

more to say on the impact of competition on universities in a few minutes. Here it is sufficient to note that although the Commonwealth government since Whitlam was taking the pro-active role in shaping tertiary education, the governance of nearly all the universities still vested in the States, so that there were limits to Canberra's capacity to shape orderly and rational policies. Instead the Commonwealth government in 1991 found itself in the situation of an eccentric millionaire who has entered thirty-four horses to compete in the same race. To secure the best results from each competitor, the Commonwealth then began each year to cut down their rations of hay and chaff, confidently proclaiming that as a consequence they would run better. Let us evaluate the results, as provided in the statistical tables in *'High Education at the Crossroads.'*

First: student - staff ratios have deteriorated, are deteriorating and show little sign of improving in the foreseeable future. Between 1991 and 2000 the total number of students in Australian universities increased from 534 510 to 695 485, as a rise of 30 per cent. Some of that increase was due to the successful recruitment of fee-paying overseas students, whose numbers during the period more than trebled from under 30 000 to over 95 000. At the same time the number of full-time university staff rose by just three per cent, from 59 753 to 61 586. The number of part-time and casual staff has increased but the number of full-time lecturers [level B] - the grade at which tenured full-time staff traditionally commenced their appointments - actually fell by eleven per cent. That is to say that, although those already in the system continued to gain promotion to the rank of associate professor or professor, and although short-term appointments increased at the grade formerly known as tutors, the 1990s saw an eleven per cent cut in the young career academics who used to be the main body of infantry in teaching and innovation. Furthermore among the senior staff there were some who took advantage of the abolition of compulsory retirement at sixty-five to hang on to their tenured positions. Largely bereft of originality in teaching and creativity in research, but not scandalous enough to justify a university administration in hazarding the wrangle of dismissal proceedings, these barnacles may be found in quiet corners of most long-established universities, blocking the prospects of younger scholars.

Tenure is a security mainly enjoyed by older university staff, and this of course is the wrong way round. The young scholars between the ages of thirty and fifty are those who need tenure. It is they who require time to develop big research projects whose results may take several years to accumulate. It is they who have the expenses of young families and mortgages. Older scholars should be employed on five-year contracts, so that they may retire gracefully when they reach their use by date. For some this will come at fifty. Others may still be going strong at 75 or 80. But it is for their university colleagues and their students to judge.

Such increase as there has been in staff numbers has been almost entirely in the category of staff involved only in research. The proportion involved in research and teaching fell between 1991 and 2000 by one per cent; the proportion in teaching only by eight per cent. Admittedly during the time there has been an increase of 37 per cent in the number of female academic staff as against four per cent for males, but the inescapable inference is that women are filling the part-time and fractional positions with their limited prospects. During the 1990s the number of higher degree students by either research or coursework has more than doubled, and if it is the practice, as it should be, that the supervision of higher degree students falls largely to full-time members of staff, then the pressure on part-time staff teaching at the undergraduate level has been considerably exacerbated.

Secondly: Australian universities are accordingly under pressure to produce the maximum number of graduates. Students pay fees. Whether these are funded by HECS contributions to be repaid at some time in the future or whether they are provided support by supportive parents the students want to undertake only those courses of study which lead directly to a basic qualification promising the chance of a job. They do not wish to be distracted by courses intended to broaden their cultural background. Nor will they make good the deficiency, as students did in the past, by spending their lunch hours or other interludes of time sitting around the student cafeterias discussing God, sex and politics and all those other traditional mainstays of undergraduate conversation. In many cases they will spend the minimum possible time on campus because they have children to mind or part-time jobs undertaken to keep their load of debt within manageable proportions. Government policy encourages these tendencies.

The recent ministerial discussion paper on *Higher Education at the Crossroads* quotes with approval the American educationist D B Johnstone who argues that 'the average student is not learning as fast as he or she can, and that some manipulation of how we organise and reward both teaching and learning can yield more learning for the resources invested and paid for by the taxpayer, parent and student.' A major thrust of the ministerial paper is the urge to increase what it described as 'learning productivity.' There is a considerable risk that concentration on 'learning productivity' combined with increasing deference to student demand will not result in an improved tertiary sector. On the contrary it will result more and more in the production of graduates who are little more than diligent, credentialled oafs.

Some of you may wish to challenge this description. You will point out that this phenomenon of reduced public funding for the universities coupled with increased student numbers and the merging of tertiary institutions of all kinds into one common category is not unique to Australia. It can be found in most parts of the English speaking world. Australia has two special problems. The first of these, and possibly the less important, is the narrowing cultural background available in secondary and tertiary education. Forty or fifty years ago Australians were still looking over their shoulders at their British and European heritage, and it was more usual for a student to finish his or her education with at least a little exposure to the literature, history and mythologies of the Old World. At the very least they might be expected to have encountered the King James Bible and to be aware of some of the stories in the Old and New Testaments which have provided the basis for so

much Western art and literature.

As the Antipodes drift further from these cultural origins, the British and European traditions are receding from sight, but they have not been replaced by a comparable familiarity with the languages and culture of East and South Asia. Instead many young Australians complete their education knowing little about any part of the world outside Australia. What little they know is mediated largely through American film and television produced for audiences whose points of reference are even more narrow and inward-looking than ours in Australia. An Australian businessman negotiating with a French or Japanese colleague may be as good as his peers during the meeting, but may not be able to keep up with conversation once it goes to anything else.

These are remedies for this state of affairs. It would be possible to re-examine the age at which young Australians leave school to enter tertiary education. At present this is seventeen, which means that if they proceed straight through university they graduate at twenty-one or twenty-two without experience of a world outside the teaching situation and with a narrowly focussed educational content. In the United States there are junior colleges where students are exposed to two or three years of general education before embarking on their professional specialisation.

In the United Kingdom they have that extra year at school known as Sixth Form where secondary education may be topped up at depth before the student enters university. In Australian circumstances the junior college model would probably prove more feasible, but there is little likelihood that the public would accept a system which prolonged the years of tertiary education and with it the accumulating financial debt which had to be discharged on graduation. In all this it must be understood that our targets are modest. It would be enough if every Australian graduate, whatever his, or her specialism was able to pick up a copy of *Scientific American* or a copy of *History Today* and read one article with understanding. In such a case we might not be a knowledge nation but we would be well on the way to becoming an educated nation.

Failing this outcome we could give greater support to mature age students as they seek to re-educate themselves. Mature age students, as most university staff will tell you, are rewarding because they come voluntarily for a clearly understood purpose. The popularity of organisations such as The University of the Third Age suggests that we could improve Australia's intellectual capital considerably by encouraging mature age participation in tertiary education more systematically, but individuals are discouraged by financial cost. Beyond the factor of cultural self-improvements lies another consideration. In the past it was the case that once students graduated in law or medicine or dentistry or education that he or she was deemed fit to practise without any further professional development. No matter how the technology or the practice of their profession may advance during their years in the workplace they have until recently been under little direct pressure to upgrade their qualifications.

The only profession which provided sabbatical leave for practitioners to sharpen their skills was the profession of tertiary education, and university staff were constantly derided by outsiders for enjoying one in seven as a paid holiday. It should have been common practice for all professions to take sabbatical breaks. Although the need for lifetime professional development has gained considerable ground during the last decade or two it is still often seen as an extra to be undertaken in the practitioners' limited spare time. So we add mature-age education, professional, cultural, and recreational, among the tasks to be addressed by our tertiary sector.

The response of the tertiary sector to all these problems has not been quite as coherent as could be wished, and this has to a large extent been the result of competition policy. There is growing evidence to suggest that competition policy as practised among universities during the last ten years has produced few benefits and has actually led to inefficiencies and loss of momentum. At the undergraduate level it has been argued frequently, if not repetitiously, by Andrew Norton, that competition will spur universities to improve the quality of their teaching so that they are rewarded with increased enrolments as the word gets around and students flock to sit at the feet of the gifted teachers. Well, it ain't necessarily so. My own university, Murdoch University in Western Australia, was judged top in teaching performance for five years running - a five star performance matched by no other university in Australia - and this achievement made almost no perceptible difference to patterns of enrolment. Students do not choose their university because of its record in teaching or research. They choose it because it has wealth and prestige, or because their parents went there, or because it is convenient in terms of transport, or because their friends are going there, or because the profession which they want to pursue is taught there. Very seldom is the choice made because of the quality of the academic staff.

Australia's older and wealthier universities have recognised the importance of status, and have formed themselves into the self-selected and self-serving Group of Eight, distancing themselves from the rest and claiming a superior pre-eminence in research and teaching which justifies favoured treatment by federal funding authorities. As St Matthew's gospel puts it: 'To him that both shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath'. Unfortunately the twenty-six universities outside the charmed circle have also recruited excellent teaching and research staff. During the last three decades young academics in search of a tenured position have gone wherever the jobs have been offering. Consequently even the former colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology have been able to recruit some first-class staff and to establish some first-class research centres.

If Australia's effort in research and advanced education is to proceed at maximum efficiency there must be co-operation between universities, but this co-operation has been slow to achieve. The wealthier universities have not been eager to extend the hand of collaboration to their colleagues, and yet without that collaboration we have duplication and dilution of effort. There is hardly a public

university in Australia does not offer a qualification calling itself a Master of Business Administration, because this is seen as a good draw for overseas students, but the intellectual quality of most of these degrees is mediocre.

There are many instances of universities, even in the same city, duplicating the provision of laboratory facilities rather than concentrating them. The funding mechanisms by which the Commonwealth allocates resources have not in the past encouraged co-operation, though it is possible that the current inquiry initiated by Minister Nelson may make a start in addressing this problem. Meanwhile our universities relate to their neighbours in a way, which is at best unsystematic and at worst encourages dog-eat-dog behaviour with talk of mergers and takeovers. It is time we heard less of competition and more of collaboration.

It is just possible that universities acting in collaboration would be more successful in attracting support from the private sector than when they act alone. Our politicians have shown a conveniently exaggerated faith in the availability of private philanthropy to make good the shortfall in public funding. Unlike the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge Australia's universities do not possess property accumulated over several centuries. Unlike the universities of the United States we do not exist in an environment where such families as the Rockefellers, the Fords and the Carnegies sought to sweeten their reputations by generous endowments. These millionaires seem to have set an example for others, so that it is quite common for moderately affluent American families to commemorate their names by a bequest to the local campus.

In Australia there are fewer resident plutocrats and their example has not been uniformly encouraging. Lang Hancock, for instance, will be remembered more for spending \$30 million to provide a roof over his head in old age and for inability to discourage litigation among his heirs than for any good which he did for the advancement of Australian science or culture. In any case the trend recently has been for the ownership of Australian businesses to move offshore, and it cannot be expected that a multinational company will see its interest as best served by singling out any individual Australian university for largesse. Here again it is possible that they might be more impressed by the stronger research proposals which could be put up by universities acting in collaboration.

All that I have said so far constitutes a familiar litany of academic grievances. Funds are dwindling, stands are falling, traditions of collegiality are eroded, and the Philistines are at the gate. None of these complaints appears to find much sympathy from the Australian public. It would be going too far to assert that there is an active anti-intellectualism such as Richard Hofstadter detected in the United States, but a pessimist would not find it hard to detect one or two worrying tendencies. Such a pessimist might scan the opinion columns of our tabloids, counting the number of times the words 'academic' or 'intellectual' are used as terms of contempt, usually linked with some epithet such as 'airy-fairy', 'ivory-tower' or 'do-gooder,' [I wonder why everyone wants to be a 'do-badder']. These attitudes are not new. The railwayman Matthew Keating, later to become a successful businessman and father of an Australian prime-minister, used to assert fifty years ago that 'academics were pimples on the bum of society.' The pessimist might ponder on the arguments over refugee policy, where the viewpoint of the highly educated seems out of kilter with the attitudes shown by both major political parties and more than two-thirds of the public at large. And yet Australians want universities. We have only to look at the efforts of every moderately sized country town to lobby for a centre of tertiary education. University funding has suffered retrenchment not because of any entrenched hostility among the general Australian community but because the universities have not taken great pains to convince the public of their value and because they have failed to collaborate in defending themselves. The tertiary sector is in need of allies, and the most natural alliance in sight would be an alliance with the libraries.

Of course during the last decade the libraries of Australia have suffered many of the same pressures as the universities. They have been squeezed financially at a time when the lowly standing of the Australian dollar has made it more than usually expensive to import books and serials from overseas. They have been required to find the capital for large-scale conversion to computer technology. They are also up against widespread public apathy.

It is easy for someone working in the tertiary sector to empathise with Alan Bandy's comment that 'The historical reality is that society has a fuzzy, and probably limited, perception of what librarians stand for and do, and financial support what for they do has waxed and waned according to changes in the political, social and economic climate.' To this can be added the further historical reality that the financially tough times are not likely to go away in the foreseeable future. No federal government is likely to distribute largesse with the munificence of a Menzies or Whitlam. No source of private philanthropy is likely to come forward to make up more than a small percentage of the shortfall. If we are not to succumb to the tyranny of ignorance we shall need to deploy our resources more skilfully than we have managed to do in the last decade.

Specifically I would prescribe the following measures:

- 1: Instead of the universities dividing themselves between the elite group of eight and the disadvantaged twenty-six, the wealthier universities should take the lead in forming research consortia with their neighbours, sharing their skilled personnel and resources, and combining to seek financial support and form where appropriate overseas lineages. With one exception which I shall nominate shortly it is vanity for even the wealthiest of Australia's universities to think of inflating itself into one of the world's leaders through its own unaided capacity. Our universities are not big enough and do not draw upon a numerous enough pool of staff or students to be equal to the task. They would have better prospects through partnership.

2.: The Australian National University should revert to the original concept on which it was founded and become an institute for advanced research and postgraduate training. In the circumstances of 1960 there was a case for annexing the undergraduate Canberra University College to the ANU. Now however there is a perfectly serviceable undergraduate university in the University of Canberra, and it would make sense to integrate it with the undergraduate faculties of ANU, thus constituting a medium-sized university of some twenty thousand student enrolments. The Institute of Advanced Studies at ANU could then concentrate on the role of leadership in research excellence for which it was designed.

3: Current moves to standardise where possible the provision of electronic information in libraries and universities should be encouraged and funded. This is part of the process by which access to learning will be facilitated not only for students but also for the wider public. Much of the rhetoric about the knowledge economy slides over the issue of ensuring the widest possible access. There are still many Australians who do not possess a computer of any kind, who never consult the Internet, and who are easily intimidated when confronted by electronic technology. In mounting a national computer education campaign an enlightened government would do well to utilise the public libraries as the focal points for such an education program. It should not be done on the cheap as an added burden for overburdened staff, but it should be thoughtfully planned and sufficiently funded. It is a national priority, for unless we ensure equity of access to computer literacy we are at risk of widening the divisions in Australian society.

4: We should not expect however that the book will be superseded as a means of sharing information. Our aim must be to produce a community of citizens who are at home in both media.

5: A question insufficiently explored in both the Knowledge Nation manifesto and the Nelson report is the potential of our new media for decentralised education. Those who doubt the efficiency of education by computer sometimes express the view that it will lead to the creation of a national of isolates, each in a private world with his or her VDU. There will always be a need however for discussion groups and tutorials. It may well be that instead of the students coming to the campus, the campus will more and more come to the students in the form of tutors travelling to the suburbs and the country centres and leading discussion groups based on material, which has previously been transmitted electronically.

Distance educators are already moving in this direction. I am inclined to think that these problems of access might more readily be administered at the level of State government or possibly even at local government than through a scheme administered from Canberra. It is notorious that the Commonwealth government has been pressing the States to use some of the revenue generated by the GST to re-enter fields which they have abandoned to the federal authorities, such as tertiary education. However unless this is planned carefully it could lead to confusion and duplication of effort. If it is accepted that the Commonwealth sets the directions of policy and the provision of resources to create learning materials, it might fall to the States to handle the issue of equitable access. I recognise that this would need careful and considered negotiation.

6: We need more and better databanks, sometimes at an absurdly simple level of provision. For example in my own subject, history, the practice existed for some years in the 1970s and 1980s of compiling an annual list of research theses for which degrees were awarded at each of Australian universities. This practice has now lapsed; no organisation seems willing or able to afford to take responsibility for its revival, to the considerable inconvenience of the practising researchers. I imagine that this example could be multiplied many times across the disciplines.

The immediate task is to priorities our needs and to lobby for a systematic program to provide them. Funding bodies such as the Australian Research Council have tended to regard bibliographies and databanks as a lower priority than more obviously cutting-edge research, and yet without the essential building blocks of printed and electronic bibliographies much duplication and wasted effort will result. Such projects require a modest investment but for much research provide an essential part of infrastructure.

7: Finally we need to remember that the universities and the libraries are not in the business of communicating information or even knowledge solely for the purpose of generating national income. This is an important goal, but it is never likely to be neglected. I am old-fashioned enough to believe that it is equally important to encourage civility in our society, and by this I mean an understanding and tolerance of viewpoints other than our own and a recognition that those who disagree with us are not necessarily motivated by stupidity or malice. Such understanding and tolerance can never be taken for granted. In today's Australia it is threatened not only by the crude over-simplifications of talkback radio and the frequently boorish adversarial behaviour of our parliaments but more profoundly by the fear among many of us of the unknown. The unknown takes many forms. It may take the form of alien languages and cultures, particularly among refugees. It may take the form of technological change. It may take the form of new methods of economic organisation and new practices in the work place. Usually the unknown can become the known if the necessary information is available. The transmission of information lies with the media, the libraries, the schools and the universities. Australians need first and foremost to be taught that they should be satisfied with nothing but the best. I hope that this conference will have the outcome of taking a step in that direction.