



# **Aquinas Memorial Lecture 2003**

**Delivered at the Australian Catholic University, McAuley Campus,  
1100 Nudgee Rd Banyo Queensland 4014**

**Abstract of Aquinas Lecture Tuesday 1 July.**

## **Cash, merit and scholarship in the 21th century university**

**Peter Spearritt**

**Peter Spearritt** has taught in politics, history, urban and environmental studies, and tourism and communications at various Australian universities. He worked on exhibitions including *Australians and the Monarchy* and *Seeing Brisbane 1881-2001*. He has served as acting CEO of Open Net Pty Ltd and Open Learning Australia and worked on the ABC TV series *Out of Empire*. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences in 1996.

His books include *The Sydney Harbour Bridge: A life and Sydney's Century* (which won the NSW Premier's award for Australian History), general editor of the five reference volumes in *Australians: a historical library*, co-edited *Cambridge Studies in Australian History*, with 27 titles in the series, and co-authored books like *Holiday Business: Tourism in Australia since 1870*.

He is currently executive director of The Brisbane Institute, which is supported by universities, state and local government, and a number of major corporations.

## **Cash, merit and scholarship in the 21th century university**

Universities, like all our great institutions, cost money to run. Like hospitals, they have fancy overheads, and the client throughput isn't always as efficient as it could be. Over the last twenty years most Australian universities have moved from having publicly funded places for both domestic and international students, to institutions where almost all students pay for some (via HECS) or all of the real costs of tuition. Some of our universities are now so strapped for cash that they charge a lot more than the real cost of tuition for some groups of students in a desperate attempt to shore up less remunerative programs. While most

---

academics still like to think of them all as students, any student advisor facing an aggrieved full-fee paying student knows that they are confronting a client.

Of course universities were always businesses, in the sense that major religious groups have a property portfolio and often a school system as well. But I will argue in this lecture that universities, in adopting both the language and the practices of the business community are doing so to the detriment of the ideals of education, and in some cases to its quality as well. I am not suggesting that grand institutions haven't always had elements of cross subsidy, like any large business. My concern is that business language and cash flow preoccupations are now so engrained in the universities that it will be hard to reverse the cycle of commodification and consumerism.

Traditionally most universities have selected students on various tests of merit. Some wealthy private American universities go beyond such conventional tests of merit (with their inherent class bias), and attempt to recruit from clearly disadvantaged sections of society. With the notable exception of indigenous programs and students with physical or mental disabilities, very few Australian universities have shown real interest in targeting disadvantaged students, unless they are forced to do so by the socio-economic circumstances of their own institution's location, and even then only if they fear being under enrolled.

Most of the Great Eight universities get the majority of their students from elite private and selective government schools or government schools in elite areas. This is a very satisfactory arrangement.

The students are on the whole able, although occasionally one finds a mathematician who writes a sentence without a verb. These students, if they are not (courtesy of their own home background) secure in their upper middle class setting, soon learn to create networks to help that happen. The parents of many of these students have already been paying for private high school tuition, so it is no surprise that the Great 8 and the current federal cabinet, itself predominantly a product of fee-based private schools, embraces education as an individual rather than a collective good.

Such is the pervasive influence of major universities in Australia, that if they are not already in a middle class setting (St. Lucia, central Adelaide, Carlton, North Ryde) they go about buying up property and gentrifying the area, either through middle class resettlement (Sydney), professional and institutional domination (the Monash Medical Centre) or educational property deals (Bond, QUT at Kelvin Grove).

All universities happily use the state-government funded examination system to select their students by merit. The most competitive institutions are also the ones most likely to excel at research, through a variable mix of talent, longevity, venture capital and able recruiting are all key factors. And not all good researchers are good at or even want to teach. Key researchers not only have to keep up their quota of refereed articles, they also have to write countless funding applications, especially where research generates further government support, most notably in medicine. Having spent two thirds of my own student and teaching life in these institutions, who am I to question the model? In the good old days, and some of us, in the words of Tom Lehrer, must beware of becoming 'soggy with nostalgia', we only had one medical, dental and law school in each state and indeed if you were an island and not a continent, you didn't need them at all.

. Within the space of just four decades we have seen the collapse of the guild socialist professional model, based on restricted supply and rigged professional fees on graduation. Only the dentists, medical specialists and some clever elements of the legal profession have managed to retain their high fee structure as most of the other professions, and now even law itself, are swamped with waves of graduates wanting to install their fee-for-service

---

shingles as quickly as possible. But more and more of these graduates actually end up as PAYG employees of private and public bureaucracies or even work for those sections of the welfare sector that have turned themselves into job finding agencies.

My questions start not just with the great 8 and the once highly-regulated professional schools, but with the never-ending pursuit of cash for the whole university sector. Even the Universities of Melbourne, Sydney and Queensland have belatedly seen the income (and of course the cultural enrichment) prospects offered by full-fee paying foreign students. Monash and UNSW used to dominate this lucrative market, but now everybody is in on the act. We know that in some institutions and in some courses well over half the students no longer have English as their first language, yet the tuition is in English and the curriculum materials demand a much higher degree of comprehension than many students have. If you have let them in because they are deemed to have the appropriate level of language skills, they won't be full fee paying anymore if you have to get into expensive remedial English language teaching.

Australian universities have dramatically opened up to the market place – the favoured word of socially mobile academic administrators - to become besotted with the issue of graduate employment prospects. Some of our colleagues, indeed whole new Schools created out of cannibalised disciplinary Departments, have become captive to major employers who want to dictate curriculum in the narrowest sense. When did you last meet a business student who would dare criticise an insurance company, unless of course the student had presciently taken the auditing major? When did you last meet a tourism student who would question either the credentials or the reasoning of the booster white shoe brigade who demanded after September 11 that the federal government increase conference tax write offs from 100 to 150%?

The successful push to increase the proportion of full fee paying foreign students in all our tertiary institutions has irrevocably altered the culture of the university system. Business and until recently IT faculties were known to be flush with funds. Medicine and law are still going strong, despite obvious oversupply, while engineering has lost a bit of lustre since work stopped on the Snowy. Traditional disciplines, especially in arts, humanities and social sciences are usually languishing, unless they manage to capture some of the foreign student dollar, so there are now bitter turf battles within most institutions about which faculties and subject areas get to grab the growth. I trust that nothing so untoward happens at any campus of the Australian Catholic University and that every cross subsidy is scrutinised on moral, ethical, scholarly and cash flow lines.

Full fees in our universities are, in my view, highly likely to create a situation where the ability to pay, especially of the parents, will matter more than talent. We all know that more and more students have to undertake part-time work to get through their degrees. Just think how strict we could be about no essay extensions if all students had rich parents and didn't need to work, other than on their studies. Quality research may continue to flourish at the postgraduate and staff level, and it may even be bankrolled by undergraduate profits. But what does it profit us to live in a society where the well-off buy their way into a university education while the rest of the population compete on merit and drop out if their financial resources, including their ability to borrow funds, are inadequate to stay the distance.