

For the University of Tasmania Council Conference, 6/7 September 2002

Twelve thoughts on universities in general and the University of Tasmania in particular, with particular relevance to members of the University Council

It should be understood that what follows is a mixture of 'fact' and opinion; my opinion is supported by nearly fifty years in higher education, and through having worked at every level of the modern university as well as for Government — but it remains opinion.

CONTEXT

1. There are thousands of universities in the world, of all shapes and sizes, and enrolments in them doubled in the 1990s. They are the indispensable foundation of the modern, 'Western', nation state, with its focus on economic growth and excellent infrastructure. So far as we can see, all societies in the world aspire to be like this because of the improved quality of life for all people this model seems to provide. Universities are likewise the foundation of the global world of the 21st century, with its focus on knowledge transmission and application.

2. In Western countries universities are now mainstream, and we now talk of 'tertiary' education as a universal expectation just as forty years ago we talked of universal secondary education, and a hundred years of universal primary education. Along with this universality has come a prevailing financial problem: universities are expensive, and can no longer be funded easily from the public purse (two exceptions: Singapore and Norway). Higher education is increasingly 'global': staff and students and ideas move quickly between countries in a fashion that has not been seen since mediaeval times, and of course the scale and speed of the endeavour now are immensely greater.

3. What universities are, or ought to be, is fiercely contested almost everywhere. In my view there is no right answer, and no good answer that will always be proved true at all times. The best we can say is that universities at their best are places where new generations are taught what the teachers think ought to be known, in an environment where knowledge is always being tested, added to and distilled.

OWNERSHIP

4. The 'privatisation' of universities has been urged in our own country and others. The present owners may object. Who are they? It would be a close call between the people of Tasmania and the people of Australia. University Councils are in effect the Trustees for the people, and are responsible to the Parliaments.

5. Governments quite often think that they are the owners, as do academic staff and even students. Vice-Chancellors can also see themselves as proprietors, but

are usually careful not to say so or act so in public. Ownership is another form of contest, and demonstrates the importance of universities.

COMPETITION

6. The world of higher education is competitive, and has always been so (Cambridge was a breakaway from Oxford). But it is important not to see the competition as being in one dimension, or reducible to one dimension. Name any university in the world, and you can find hundreds of areas in which it is inconsequential.

7. Australia, like a number of other developed countries (though not the USA), has no bad universities, and no universities that are hugely better than the others. (You can ask at once – ‘better for whom?’ And see the previous paragraph.) Nonetheless, it is a common game, and one beloved of the media, and governments, to try to rank the universities, and too many people take this kind of rubbish seriously. Councils should not fall for it, because one is nearly always going to lose.

8. The world of higher education is also highly collaborative, and when things are at their best there is a good balance between competition and collaboration. It is important for the morale of staff and students that their university is seen to be going up in the world rather than down, but even more important that it knows what it is about, and is doing that well. ‘Ranking’ is much harder when you are looking at universities with very different, but comparably important, ‘missions’. Avoid getting into national league tables; rather, see the University of Tasmania as a university that operates both in Australia and, in a meaningful way, in the world. No other Australian university will do this the same way.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA AS A ‘WORLD’ UNIVERSITY

9. There are very many kinds of universities, and it is important to see them as having both advantages and disadvantages. For example, universities like Sydney and Melbourne have the advantages of seniority and scale, but the disadvantages of being landlocked, of being conservative, of having awkward and expensive heritage buildings, and of being built around ways of organising knowledge that are rather old-fashioned (ie. around ‘disciplines’, which are late 19th century constructions, rather than ‘fields’ which are late 20th century constructions). What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of the University of Tasmania?

10. What applies in Australia has its counterparts elsewhere. In Canada there are many excellent universities apart from, for example, Toronto and British Columbia. There are fine universities in European countries, too, apart from the ones that most have heard of, like Paris, Heidelberg, Bologna, Copenhagen and the like. While it is probably true that the older universities have a head start in their own country, that local dominance is something of a hindrance in reaching

out into the world. Newer and smaller universities have less lead in their saddlebags. They are also less self-satisfied, and have a greater need to do new things.

11. All new initiatives take time to develop, and no university can achieve a number of them all at once. It is important to set a general strategic direction in which a few new initiatives can build on each other. For me the direction is reasonably plain: Tasmania should not try to compete aggressively with Australian mainland universities on their own turf, but to develop itself in world terms as an interesting and successful university in a most interesting and enjoyable part of the world. A lot of universities in the northern hemisphere have comparable situation, eg. Bergen, Victoria BC, Memorial (Nfld).

12. Relationships, bi-lateral, triangular and multi-lateral, need to be built with universities in other countries which are naturally interested in what could be done here that would support their own endeavours. Polar research, island economies and politics, clean agriculture, maritime matters and so on have the capacity to involve all parts of the university in a series of relationships which make the University of Tasmania interesting in world terms. Every university needs a few things that make it not 'world class' (a most dubious and unmeasurable term) but 'world known' for those in that field or area. In time that strategy will make the University better known in Australia, and cause it to receive more Australian students.

Don Aitkin
5 September 2002