

The Search for Truth: History and Future of Universities

Review of Maxwell Bennett (2022)

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I

In 1988 the Commonwealth *Higher Education Funding Act*, piloted through Federal Parliament by John Dawkins, Minister of Education, Employment and Training, inaugurated a new regime for Australian universities.¹ The Minister's announced intention was beneficial change, or rather "reform," of the existing highly diversified post-school educational landscape, in order to create a more efficient and equitable national university system. Critics then and now have been less certain of the overall benefits and desirability of the proposed changes, and of subsequent variations on the same theme by Dawkins's numerous successors. Most but not all criticism has come from academics. University administrators or managers (as they soon came to be known), were generally content to comply with and implement the new order. It may not be unduly cynical to suggest that their initial co-operation owed something to a Faustian bargain, which saw the removal of both the former Australian Universities Commission and its powers to regulate the remuneration of vice-chancellors and

other senior university officers. Yet in a wide-ranging recent compilation on the state of Australian public universities, the former vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne, who now heads Australia's Public Service, raises a number of pointed questions about the consequences of the developments set in train by Dawkins.²

Another new title from the same publisher takes a very different approach to the same issue, placing it within a much wider chronological, geographical and philosophical context.³ It is generally not a good idea to review books written by one's friends. My excuse for embarking on this present hazardous venture is that while Max Bennett and I were student contemporaries at Melbourne University, we have subsequently followed very different intellectual and personal trajectories. I altogether lost contact with Max for nearly half a century after leaving Melbourne in 1962. Our reconnection followed circulation of a memoir by Ken McNaughton, a former member of what Bennett himself here recalls as "a group of like-minded undergraduate students from different disciplines to which we gave the

1 Note: this essay incorporates much of a review recently submitted to and published by the journal *Minerva*: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11024-022-09483-8>

2 Glyn Davis (2022), Why are Australian universities so large? in *Australian Universities: A Conversation about Public Good*, ed. Julia Horne and Mathew A. M. Thomas (Sydney University Press, 2022), 41–53; see also idem, *The Idea of an Australian University* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2017).

3 Maxwell Bennett (2022), *The Search for Truth: History and Future of Universities* (Sydney University Press, 2022).

pretentious name ‘the Athenian Society’” (p. xix). Brought together in 1959 by the slightly older and somewhat charismatic Max, after he had published in the student newspaper *Farrago* an article entitled “The Search for Truth,” our small cadre of earnest young men met weekly for hours of intense if naive amateur philosophising.

I did not then know anything of Max’s family background and upbringing, which go some way towards explaining his life-long dedication to what Charles Darwin once termed “an instinct for the truth.” His mixed parentage (Jewish father of Russian-Rumanian extraction, Catholic-Irish mother), consequent early acquaintance with both the Torah and the New Testament, and Catholic schooling evidently focused this young enquiring mind on some basic epistemological questions. Max’s personal dedication to this mode of enquiry was quite unique among our group. Even after I had dropped out during or following that first year, it was — and indeed still is — difficult not to feel in some awe of the intellectual span of a former electrical engineering student who, after having been forced by paternal mandate to abandon school for a technical apprenticeship at age 14, chose to spend his spare time reading classic texts ancient and modern — from Plato and Descartes to Whitehead, Russell and Wittgenstein — and now in his early eighties, garlanded with honours, has only just retired as professor emeritus of neuroscience at the University of Sydney.

This latest book is characteristically wide-ranging in its coverage of centuries, cultures, languages and topics, from twelfth-century French nominalists and realists through the German enlightenment, languages and linguists, to twentieth-century nuclear

physics, corona viruses, artificial intelligence, post-modernism and neo-liberalism, to mention only a fraction of the polymathic whole. But despite its subtitle, the author maintains that his concern is not simply to add another volume to the already extensive bibliography on the history of universities. It is rather to highlight “the greatest events in the evolution of the university that established the faculty, the department, and the administrative structure, which together optimised the means of maintaining and prospering the university” (p. 5).

The four parts into which his book is divided consider first the search for “Divine Truth” in the nascent university of Paris during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with chapters on Peter Abelard’s logic, Thomas Aquinas’s reconciliation of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy, and the emergence of scholasticism as the distinctive pedagogical methodology of the new educational institution on the Left Bank of the Seine. We then move to “Empirical Truth and the University of Berlin,” with Immanuel Kant’s rejection of humanism in favour of scientific education and Wilhelm von Humboldt’s revolutionary establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810 as “the mother of all modern universities” (p. 138). Moving into the twentieth century, the third part deals with “Scientific Truth and the University of California,” the new era of big science inaugurated by Robert Oppenheimer and Ernest Lawrence, together with Clerk Kerr’s masterful reorganisation of Californian public higher education institutions, which preserved and enhanced the multi-campus University of California, while enabling state and community colleges to offer all secondary-school graduates a merit-based pathway to higher education.

Finally, Bennett turns to “The University and Contemporary Challenges,” identifying three existential threats to the future of humanity: first, artificial intelligence, notably the risks posed by machines which may soon become not only more intelligent than their mortal makers, but capable of still further intellectual self-improvement; second, the continuing proliferation of nuclear weapons, and pandemics. (Third, the dangers of climate change are perhaps already too obvious and well-recognised to merit further discussion here.) Universities and academics have an obvious role to play in meeting and mitigating these challenges to the continued presence of *Homo sapiens* on this planet. But the extent to which they can be expected to do so is another question.

His concluding chapter examines the various current “forces arrayed against the core values of universities.” These include the Hayekian/Reaganite/neo-liberal reaction to the growth of government spending on education and social services generally following World War II, the somewhat paradoxical tendency for governments to seek ever more control over the operation of universities even as the proportion of university income attributable to direct contributions from the state declines, the rise of interdisciplinary research centres which erode the former dominance of discipline-based departments, the growing influence of variously dubious national and international university rankings on the allocation of scarce resources, especially research funding, and the increased power of university administrators and managers *vis-à-vis* career academic researchers and teachers.

In this chapter much of Bennett’s analysis is derived from his own experience as a

senior and successful Australian academic, and is particularly applicable to the plight of Australia’s public universities, most of which have chosen (or been forced) to replace significant shortfalls in government funding with much increased dependence upon fee income derived from international student enrolments. But the difficulties which now face Australian universities are scarcely unique to this country, even if the magnitude of the emoluments received by their vice-chancellors (and presidents — as these leaders now dub themselves, following American fashion in this as other respects) may be unparalleled elsewhere.

II

Bennett has given us an historically based apologia and manifesto for his vision of what a university is, or should be: not so much a work of history *per se*. This is not to criticise the quality of his research and exposition. Even if much of the historical content is unavoidably reliant on secondary sources, considerable effort has been made to seek appropriate expert advice, and the subject bibliographies appended to the first three parts cover an impressive range of both original printed material and recent scholarly literature. The argument is presented in a clear, unaffected, and largely jargon-free prose; unfamiliar technical detail and vocabulary rarely get in the way of the theme being developed, and a multitude of visual aids — diagrams, graphs, illustrations, tables — supplement the text. I personally find the prolific use of numbered section headings to divide up each chapter slightly distracting in terms of following the main argument and would prefer to read my way through pages unadorned by such analytical signposts; but no doubt they will bother few

readers from other disciplines where this practice is entirely routine and expected. A reprint or second edition will provide the opportunity to address the very occasional typo, as well as to correct the unfortunate anachronism which has Wilhelm von Humboldt's work influencing "the idea of the university in the late 17th and early 18th century" (p. 128).

So much for form, what of content? The historical development of universities plainly involves a good deal more than the search for truth. After enthusiastic references to the "thousands" (p. 2) or "hundreds if not thousands" (p. 21) of students attracted to Abelard's lectures, relatively little attention is paid to the individuals who comprised the undergraduate body attending medieval, early modern, and modern universities, or the motives which impelled them to seek admission, and their families, friends and benefactors to support their studies. While the search for truth doubtless played a part in individual cases, it seems likely that the quest for employment, preferment and social status was at least an equal and often a higher priority. Universities and their members have also always exercised significant economic and political roles, as employers and consumers, as well as sources of expertise, influence and patronage, alongside their primary educational and intellectual functions.

Nor did even medieval universities enjoy a monopoly on the search for truth. In the early modern period (c. 1400–1750), learned academies, salons, artisans' workshops and learned societies all provided venues for such activity, which continues today in a wide variety of both public and private research centres and institutions. That having been said, the search for truth was and is a very

important and sometimes overlooked part of the history of universities, even if other bodies might claim at least some of the same *raison d'être*.

At some points, especially in the discussion of German philosophical and educational thought during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, more consideration of the particular circumstances of time and place, the social and political context in which thinkers and universities were operating, and how these environments may have affected the outlook of individuals and institutions, would have been desirable. Exclusive focus on the history of ideas too easily gives the impression that thought moves entirely of its own volition, by a process of more or less logical internal development. While this may be true to some extent, it is rarely the whole truth. Another danger, which Bennett does not altogether escape, is that tracing a pattern of evolution from past to present can support a teleological narrative of progressive change, imparting unquestioned legitimacy to the current state of things, as though all previous change has somehow been directed towards the situation in which we now find ourselves — or did, before recent unfortunate tendencies disturbed its optimal equilibrium.

Although written in Australia by an eminent senior Australian academic, this book says little about the development of Australian universities before the late twentieth century. That may well be because in terms of culture, curriculum, governance and structure, Australian universities were heavily derivative of English, or British, universities until at least the 1970s, and as Bennett points out, the English "resisted the Humboldtian model for a long time" (p. 139).

German universities did have their influential admirers in nineteenth-century Britain, including the poet and public intellectual Matthew Arnold, who nevertheless sought to defend the traditional classical and literary learning of Oxford and Cambridge against those who, like Mark Pattison and T. H. Huxley, believed that higher education should henceforth be dominated by more exact and utilitarian studies, a view which gained increasing institutional weight in the newly-established provincial colleges and “redbrick” universities. Bennett’s claim that the “autonomous college system” of Oxford and Cambridge enabled those élite institutions “to ignore all changes and directions from the state” (p. 139) is also a bit sweeping, given the royal commissions into Oxford and Cambridge of 1852–54 and 1873, together with the reform acts of 1854, 1856, and 1871 which largely secularised both ancient universities, removed the requirement that college fellows abandon their teaching posts upon marriage, and established new faculty structures.

Nevertheless the German model was certainly more successful in the United States, beginning with its implementation by Daniel Coit Gilman at Johns Hopkins University from 1876. Yet even in the USA remnants of an earlier Oxbridge influence persisted in the Ivy League and liberal arts colleges. Indeed it is conceivable that the eventual triumph of what became the German-American model of the modern university throughout the Anglosphere owed at least as much to the collapse of the

British empire and the rise of American global dominance after World War II as it did to the intrinsic virtues of Humboldt’s educational vision. Nor did that triumph come without cost. What worried the Victorian opponents of German professors was not just the rebarbative pedantry of Dr Casaubon and his like, but the likely deleterious impact of a research-dominated academic culture on the quality of teaching provided to undergraduate students. Of course, those students were largely selected from a relatively small socio-economic segment of the population at large. But it would be difficult to demonstrate that the modern era of mass higher education and considerably worse staff:student ratios is capable of providing a much-expanded and in some respects more socially inclusive student body with an educational experience of equal depth and all-round quality to that enjoyed by their counterparts even half a century ago. That graduates from the University of Melbourne, long Australia’s top-placed university in international rankings based largely on research metrics, were of all Australian university students surveyed in 2021 the least satisfied with their undergraduate experience, is one among many straws pointing in the opposite direction.⁴

III

But whatever one’s doubts or misgivings about Bennett’s historiography, it would be entirely misleading to end on a negative note. The second half of his book is particu-

⁴ 2021 Student Experience Survey, at [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)#report](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses)#report). The interpretation of such survey results is plainly fraught with difficulty. Was it just that Melbourne’s highly-selected student body arrived on campus with more unrealistic expectations than those of their counterparts at less exalted institutions? Alternatively, did their already finely-honed critical faculties become even more acute in response to the excellent quality of the teaching they received? On balance, a long history of student complaints about Melbourne’s overcrowded “tutorials” makes the former seem more likely.

larly compelling, perhaps in part because it deals with more recent and contemporary history. The accounts of twentieth-century physics and Clerk Kerr's multiversity are real highlights and the sobering dissection of threats to humanity's very survival gains added force from the consideration that the nuclear-rattling Russian autocrat's Ukranian adventure evidently post-dated its composition. The final chapter is almost equally depressing, not least because it is hard to see how either the present state of universities or the economic, political and social contexts in which they exist are likely to change markedly for the better in the short to medium term. On the other hand, as Bennett himself points out, universities have been around for a very long time,

while experiencing numerous transformative changes over the course of that *longue durée*. So it clearly would be premature to abandon all hope, or to assume that the present less than ideal condition of the modern university will prove any more durable — let alone terminal — than those of its numerous predecessors. The key question is whether and when the pendulum which since the 1980s has swung so hard against the ideal of universities as collegial scholarly communities primarily dedicated to the search for truth will assume a reverse trajectory. Perhaps it has already begun to do so.

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