Improving Australian Universities

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Recent years have seen intense discussion of what Australian universities should be like. Most people seem to believe that changes are needed, but do not agree on what should be done. Here I offer suggestions from the perspective of someone who has studied in both the Australian and US systems, and has also taught in both systems.

The US does not do all things well, but it is very good at universities. Here I do not primarily have in mind elite private universities like Harvard and Princeton, which have amassed huge amounts of money and can skim the top tiny percentage of a very large population to make up their student bodies. Those are remarkable places, but not relevant models for Australia. The most relevant comparisons are with the best state universities, like Berkeley and Michigan. These are impressive institutions, and their achievements are especially striking given the dismal state of much of the US high school system. Many US students enter university knowing very little, but they leave knowing quite a lot, and well prepared for the next stage in life. They also leave with a sense of loyalty to their university, and they remember this forty years later with their chequebooks.

Several lessons can be drawn from these successes. In the first part of this article I argue in favor of a "Californian model" for the overall organization of the Australian

university system. In the latter part of the article I make suggestions based on the US experience as a whole.

The Californian Model

Expressions of admiration for Californian universities have appeared before in the Australian discussion, but what is it that makes this comparison relevant? Here I focus on three areas: the overall structure of the system, work conditions of academic staff, and student fees.

California (population 36 million) has a public university system that assigns distinct roles to (roughly) three different kinds of institution. These are the "UC" (University of California) universities, the "State" universities, and the local "community colleges." (There are also various private universities, like Stanford and Caltech.) The UC system comprises ten universities, including UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego (where I studied), and others. The best of the UC's, like Berkeley, are among the best universities in the country, public or private. They are highly selective with respect to students. The salaries and workloads for staff tend to be comparable to those at top private universities like Harvard, and the system used for hiring and promoting academic staff is similar to that at the elite private universities. A UC undergraduate education is not extremely expensive for a Californian local, but it costs more than other public universities in California do.

The "California State" universities make up a second tier, with 23 campuses. This system includes places like San Diego State, San Francisco State, and Cal State LA. For entering students, these are not nearly as selective as the UC's. They are also less expensive to attend. Their role is to make a good tertiary education available to a large number of Californians, and some outsiders, at reasonably low cost.

The third tier is the large network of "community colleges." They are not usually referred to as universities, and the undergraduate degree usually takes two years rather than the four years of the UC's and the State universities. The community college system provides an inexpensive and very accessible entry into tertiary education. For some students they are a stepping stone to admission to a more selective university. For others,

their role is to provide practical and job-related forms of higher education (accounting, IT, etc). Teaching staff are less qualified and less well paid than they are the State universities and UC's.

The Californians have struck a good balance between the perils of having too much hierarchy, and having too little, in a public higher education system. The distinction between "UC" and "State" universities is widely accepted, because most Californians seem to want two distinct things. They want a system for educating large numbers of students who are not rich or brilliant, and they want to have a few public universities that can compare to any institution in the world. The top UC campuses also play a leadership role in research and the intellectual culture of the state. It is recognized that the intensity of a student's coursework will be different in a UC as opposed to a State university, and the work expectations for academic staff differ as well.

Both kinds of universities engage in a mix of teaching and research. What is different is the balance – there is more emphasis on research and postgraduate work at the UCs, and more on undergraduate teaching at the State universities. But it is a key part of the US system that teaching and research are integrated. It is routine for undergraduates, as well as post-graduate students, to be closely involved in research projects. Via the integration of teaching and research, American undergraduates are constantly being reminded that the disciplines they are learning about are changing and developing, and that the cutting edge is often not far away from what they hear in lectures. The Californian system embodies the idea that if the large State institutions were totally given over to teaching, they would not feel like universities at all.

The lives of professors and other academic staff differ across the tiers, with a different set of expectations, rewards, and stresses. A crucial factor is "tenure review." At American universities, new lecturers ("assistant professors") are reviewed for tenure around their sixth year. If they don't get tenure, they normally have to leave that institution. If they do get tenure, they have basic job security until retirement. The requirements for tenure differ across tiers and institutions. Doing a solid job is not enough to expect tenure at the top UC's. It *is* enough to expect tenure at a State university. At the top universities, expectations at tenure review can be very high. The process is far from perfect and mistakes occur.

Tenure review at the "State" universities has nothing like the same level of stress, but these jobs can be difficult in other ways. Teaching loads are higher (in my field, about 50% higher), classes are bigger, and there is more marking to do. Many staff at the State universities have the highest aspirations for their research, despite their teaching load. They want to achieve just as much as their higher-paid equivalents at Berkeley and Yale. They often succeed in this aim, but it is not part of the basic set of *expectations* that staff at the State universities work under.

Australia does not have a tenure review system of this kind. Should it introduce one? There might be a better system than US-style tenure, based on long contracts. But something *like* the tenure review system is needed, or it is impossible for top universities to maintain the quality of their staff over many decades. A tough tenure review process is part of the downside of working at a place with a lower teaching load and more research support.

In the US, almost no tertiary education is free, and fees vary enormously. Australia should not want the levels of disparity seen in the US system as a whole, but again California provides a good model. A UC campus like Berkeley presently costs about $7500 (USD) per year to attend as an undergraduate, and the normal undergraduate degrees take four years. The corresponding figure for a Cal State university is about $3000 per year. (These costs are for Californian locals. Out-of-state students pay more. It is also important that in the US, medicine and law are post-graduate degrees and are more expensive.)

A UC degree costs more because it is a ticket to a successful career, but California avoids the problem of having the top universities full of rich people and the second tier full of everyone else. All these universities give out large numbers of scholarships, and many other kinds of financial assistance, to talented students, especially from disadvantaged groups. It is also essential to ensure that no amount of money will buy a place at Berkeley for a person who does not have high ability. The UC system, and similar systems in the US, manage this reasonably well (though not perfectly). Berkeley and UCLA are not full of pampered rich kids who bought their way in regardless of talent, and it is crucial that the top Australian universities guard against that situation arising. In dealing with the question of fees, Australia also has the advantage of the

HECS system, which is better than anything in the US. In the US, students tend to take out (subsidized) loans that must be paid back regardless of their later income level. Americans I have spoken to regard HECS as an impressive innovation.

The Californian model is a good one to guide reform of the overall structure of the Australian system. It has succeeded in the difficult task of balancing the need for egalitarianism and fairness with the need to strive for real excellence.

Funding, Administration, and Teaching

Looking again at the lessons of the US case, what else should governments, academics, and students be prepared to do to make the system work?

Improving staff/student ratios should be a high priority. The teaching and administrative burdens on Australian academics seem to be wearing many of them out. As a result, there is a great incentive to obtain research grants that enable people to give up their entire teaching responsibilities for several years at a time. But the result of that is that undergraduate students may get no contact at all with the best lecturers and researchers at their university. In the top US universities, routine teaching and administration are less onerous so there is less incentive to find grants that remove one from teaching altogether. Australia needs its best academics to be interacting routinely with students, but not in a way that wears them out. When lecturers are given time to write and think for themselves, they are able to keep their classes fresh and relevant. They won't be staggering to the podium with a sheaf of fading lecture notes that have never been brought up to date.

The way to ameliorate this situation is to invest in the improvement of staff/student ratios, and to give staff more help with routine marking of papers, tutorials, and exams. In addition, administrators should resist the temptation to engage in time-draining accountability programs of the kind that plague the British university system. The staff at UC Berkeley are not made to fill out endless forms proving that Berkeley is still, indeed, a top-class university. Once the right structure and policies are in place, the need for this kind of oversight is much reduced. More generally, US universities have little of the management-obsessed culture that has been unwisely encouraged in Australia.

In return for better teaching conditions and the lifting of bureaucratic burdens, staff need to accept a more competitive environment at top universities. This includes either a tenure review system or something similar. Students also need to accept the trade-offs that come with a more differentiated system – especially trade-offs between the quality of a degree and its expense, ease of admission, and geographical convenience.

US universities are remarkable assets to the society in which they are embedded. Their evolution into their present state owes plenty to luck and money, as well as to various kinds of far-sightedness. Australia should not copy them on everything. The degree of inequality in the US university system as a whole is more than Australia could or should accept. Universities should also have no connection to big-money, televised sports, as they do in the US. It is also far from my intention to argue for an "Americanization" of Australian institutions in general or on principle; the last thing Australia wants is US-style health care, election campaigns, and gun laws. But US universities do their primary jobs well, and the public tertiary system seen in states like California is a good model for Australia.

Australia has an ideal opportunity over the next few years to reconfigure and improve its tertiary education system. The "resource boom" has brought great wealth to Australian society, but the boom must end and the wealth should be invested with an eye to post-boom life. Education is widely seen as a good place to invest, but not all wealthy university systems are good ones. Investment must be accompanied by a pragmatic assessment of which systems have been found to function well, and which will make the best use of Australia's intellectual capital.

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