E.L. 'TED' WHEELWRIGHT LECTURE

SHOULD WE ABOLISH UNIVERSITIES?

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For the last thirty years there has been a flow of books, pamphlets and articles, mostly written by academic colleagues, lamenting the state of universities. It's not exactly a flood, but it's more than a trickle, and the titles alone tell a story.

In one of the early warnings that something was going wrong in Australian higher education, Ian Lowe in 1994 published *Our Universities are Turning Us into the 'Ignorant Country'*. Since then, the titles have not become more polite. From Germany and the United States, we have *The Fall of the Faculty*, *Academic Capitalism*, *The Abandoned Mission in Public Higher Education*, *The Great Mistake* and *Wannabe U*. From other parts of the world: 'How Indian universities became profit machines', and 'The end of the South African university'. Coming home to Australia, we find titles like *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Selling Students Short*, *Bullshit Towers*, and most recently, a short book about our universities called simply *Broken*. We might conclude that the colleagues are a little worried.

Though each of these authors has a different focus or style, there's a lot of agreement in their worries. First, universities have been taken over by corporate-style managers, a group accurately called 'a permanent administrative class' by an American political scientist (Schwartz 2014). Decision-making has been centralised, university workers and students are at best 'consulted' about policy, and distrust between managers and staff has grown. Universities as organisations have been re-re-shaped on the

model of profit-making corporations. Top-down re-structuring, academic units redefined as profit centres, secrecy about major decisions, corporate double-speak, have all become familiar. At the same time, managers' salary packages have risen spectacularly.

Second, the university workforce has been re-shaped and made far more insecure. Many non-academic jobs, whose holders used to be part of the university team, have been outsourced. Solid academic tenure has gone; just about anyone can be axed in a re-structure. University teaching now relies massively on a precarious workforce that has no job security and poor career prospects. The conditions of work have been degraded: new regimes of surveillance, masquerading as 'accountability', place all staff under constant pressure.

Third, university students – re-defined as customers – are getting a poor deal. Fees have risen and keep on rising. Student debt accumulates on a massive scale. Most students are obliged to take part-time jobs to keep afloat. Class sizes have increased, while course offerings are narrower. Teaching methods have become more rigid, especially with the move online. Not surprisingly, students' attendance at lectures, and even presence on campus, have declined.

Finally, universities' cultural centrality and authority have declined. Universities used to be honoured as guardians of truth, repositories of knowledge, places of imagination and critical thinking – at the price of some academic remoteness. In recent government policy and management practice, the university sector has been re-defined in a very different way. It is now understood basically as a collection of competing firms that sell elite vocational training and expertise, indirectly selling social mobility. Apart from graduation-day rhetoric, that commercial vision is what counts most in practice.

To these main themes of recent criticism, I have some corrections to suggest. For instance, most of this literature neglects non-academic workers, who are one-half of the university workforce and are absolutely essential to university operations. Nevertheless, I think the criticisms are broadly correct. Indeed, they can be expanded. Universities still work as privilege machines. Intake is socially selective in terms of class, race and language. Historically, universities were deeply involved in colonialism (the University of Sydney's coloniality is crystallised in its wonderful motto *Sidere mens eadem mutato*: under changed skies, the same mind).

Currently the university system underpins an unequal economy of knowledge on a world scale.

To put it briefly: the contemporary university is an institution that has toxic effects on much of its workforce, fails to do well by its students, and fails to serve our society or the wider world as it could. And things can get worse.

Getting worse?

My title poses the question of 'abolition', and I will come to that proposal later. Here I will note that a kind of *practical* abolition is already being achieved by corporate-style university managers, through re-structures, downsizings and out-sourcing. Departments can be abolished, usually when managers claim that they are not bringing in enough money. Staff can be declared 'dead wood' and forced out. Most emblematic is the cutting of philosophy programmes (more visible in the USA than here). Philosophy used to be acknowledged as central to the intellectual culture of universities; it still is vital, if critical thinking is any part of what universities are for.

A more sweeping kind of abolition is now coming from the political right. Ultra-conservative attacks on climate science, evolutionary biology, gender studies and critical race studies are familiar. We have seen attempts by the Coalition in Australia to censor research grants in the humanities and social sciences, and to damage those fields by a sharp increase in student fees. The hard-line Orbán regime in Hungary has closed the whole field of gender studies, and in 2017-18 forced the Central European University out of the country.

Very recently, attacks have escalated to disempowering whole university systems. The Netanyahu government in Israel has overseen the physical destruction of all seven universities that used to exist in Gaza. Another kind of destruction has been undertaken by the Republican Party in Florida under Governor Ron DeSantis. In 2023, they staged a hostile takeover of New College, a public liberal arts college. They drove out faculty who were regarded as 'liberals', replacing them with allies of the ruling party. That seems to have been a pilot project. The state's Board of Education has general control over Florida's twelve public universities, so DeSantis packed this Board with his cronies. Their regime has seen tenure attacked, libraries purged, equity programmes terminated, and political allies

installed as university presidents. Last year, across the state, social science core courses were replaced with courses reciting the right-wing view of American history.

Prosperity

Given the amount of criticism and damage, we might think that university systems around the world were tottering. They are not. In 2025, according to UNESCO figures, the world had 264 million higher education students, more than ever before. That's 10 times the entire population of Australia. This is a large global industry, and though there are ups and downs in particular countries, on a world scale it is still growing. Universities and colleges are still supplying the world with engineers, doctors, architects, lawyers, teachers, and even economists, and are doing this on a larger scale than ever before. Note that this expansion rests on the cooperative, creative work of rank-and-file university staff, a point to which I'll come back.

University research too seems to be booming. Globally, about 5 million research papers are published in the journals each year. This number has surged with the advent of mega-journals (such as *The Lancet* group) and online-only journals (such as *PLoS*). Growth in global research output has also been driven by the huge investment in universities, especially elite universities, made by the Chinese government. Chinese researchers now publish more articles than researchers from any other country, including the United States. Five million papers mean a lot of peer reviews, and some colleagues are worrying where the ten million peer reviewers will come from. But I am confident that Elon Musk will soon work out how to write peer reviews by Artificial Intelligence, and post them on X.

Universities, then, are still collectively developing productive forces – most visibly, but not only, through the digital economy. They sustain and re-make social relations, notably producing social hierarchies through selection and exclusion. Equally important, universities *legitimate* social inequality in contemporary conditions. The University of Sydney management's tasteless publicity campaign proclaiming 'Leadership' makes a kind of sense at this level.

Universities are clearly performing tasks that matter to ruling classes and state elites. It's not surprising that corporate-style managers are able to shrug off the critics and disregard the anxiety and anger in their own workforce. The managers' position is buttressed by an informal coalition,

part of which is visible on university councils: executives of establishment companies, politicians and senior bureaucrats, elite professionals, and very rich individuals and families who are known in management-speak as 'donors' or 'philanthropists'.

More broadly, university managements and their practices are supported by the corporations that provide outsourced services, including management training; by the finance, technology and publishing industries that feed on the university system generally; and by a range of neoliberal agencies that regulate higher education, including ratings agencies, the OECD and the World Bank. In this world, the swollen salary packages for Vice-Chancellors and other managers, which seem outrageous to unionists and student activists, are likely to appear as signs of respectability and prosperity.

Thinking about contradictions

I'm struck by the contradictory character of this whole scene: prosperity and disaster, growth and decline, mostly at the same time and often in the same sites. We need ways to grasp these contradictions if we are to make a change agenda with bite. I don't have a full analysis to offer, and I don't know anyone who does. However, here are some thoughts on three structural tensions in university life (perhaps more exactly, clusters of tensions), that seem to be seated deep in our current reality.

Institutional form

The first tension concerns universities' institutional form. The problem here is not exactly new. Political economist Thorstein Veblen made a witty critique of the intrusion of business practices into universities more than a hundred years ago. But the issue now has a new scale. Basically, the labour processes of teaching and research - especially good teaching and research – emphatically require sustained, creative coordination among front-line workers. This bottom-up process of coordination and invention, in the daily life of university workers, is continually disrupted by the exercise of managerial power and the profit-and-loss logic of the corporate university. The immediate disruptions caused by restructures, and the continuing disconnections produced by outsourcing and by the centralisation of services, are stark. The systems of surveillance and reporting, and the

templates imposed on courses and research projects (made obligatory through university intranets), are less dramatic but ultimately just as intrusive.

A crucial consequence of corporate logic concerns the sustainability of the workforce. Universities' increased reliance on exploiting a precarious – and therefore disposable – teaching force is a very familiar issue. I won't dwell on it here, except to note that, from the managers' point of view, this tension is now a fact of life rather than a problem to be solved. If some employees find the stress too much, well, there's a McDonalds down the road looking for workers. A structural solution, which would give all university workers job security and address the sustainability of the workforce from generation to generation – that is not conceivable in the modern, agile, competitive, excellence-driven, corporate university.

Economic process

For teaching and research to produce their main effects – students learning at advanced levels, and research-based knowledge advancing – requires the creative and cooperative labour of the *whole* of a complex workforce. The corporate regime means that the benefits from this creativity and cooperation (including the funds it draws in) are parcelled and appropriated in very unequal ways. The startling inequality in staff pay-cheques today is one form of this, but there's more. An institution that could be a resource for the whole society, 'A University for the Common Good' as Richard Hil, Kristen Lyons and Fern Thompsett have summarised it, instead becomes a kind of above-ground mine from which particular groups extract advantages.

Many of the details are familiar to university workers. Among them: the ingenious corporations which monetise university research via journal paywalls and biomedical patents; the messy struggles among researchers for personal reputation, grants and promotions; the use of students' fees, notionally paid for teaching services, to fund managers' packages and cross-subsidise other activities of the university; the interplay of universities with banks and other financiers around student loans, building loans and university funding deficits. What matters here is not just what happens within university walls, but also the larger eco-system of relationships among corporations, which now embraces corporate universities.

Cultural project

What gives universities weight in the world, more than anything else, is their engagement in the discovery and broadcasting of truth. (If you are wary of the concept of 'truth', substitute 'accurate knowledge, careful critique and deep insight'.) It is well known how this work gets interrupted or distorted by external forces such as censorship, funders' interests, 'Intellectual Property' laws, paywalls and patents. Embarrassing as it may be, we must now recognise that pressures against truth-telling and critical thinking arise *from the corporate university itself.*

Corporations, an eighteenth-century British chancellor remarked, have neither a body to be kicked nor a soul to be damned; therefore, they do as they like. Universities have a soul: their business is truth, both finding it and telling it. All researchers know how hard the truth is to establish; all teachers know how hard it is to communicate. But the corporate university, like any other corporation, routinely practices deception. I mean routinely: in its advertising, its sloganeering, its concealment of embarrassing facts, its gaming of league tables, its reporting, its manipulation of accountability. All are modalities of fictionalising campus life.

I used to see the corporate makeover of universities as a kind of corruption, in which a gang of entrepreneurs got their pay-off for making universities more useful to the international ruling class, and less likely to produce troublesome student movements such as we knew in 1968 (for most of us, 'students in 1968' means Paris, or perhaps New York; but the real crunch came on 2 October 1968 in Tlatelolco, Mexico).[1]

I now think the class dynamic of change in universities is more complicated. Among other things, there has been a split in the ruling class. One faction maintains the cosy relationship and easy control we are used to in Australia's universities. The other faction, well represented in the Orbán, Trump and DeSantos regimes, cares nothing for research or education, but finds universities a handy target for populist attacks and a

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[1] For those not familiar with Mexican realities, the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, Tlatelolco, was the site of a large student protest against the authoritarian PRI government, in the lead-up to the Mexico City Olympic Games. The square was surrounded by police and soldiers, who opened fire. The exact death toll is not known, since the regime suppressed information, but it is widely thought that about 300 people were killed – far worse than anything that happened to protestors in Paris or Chicago.

device for cultural control. Neither faction seeks justice in the world. Both desire to legitimate inequality, though they differ about how. There are some conflicting economic interests involved too, if we remember the murderous industries which funded cancer denialism and climate denialism for many years. What is at stake, ultimately, is how reactionary parties and regimes can sustain mass support, after the failure of welfare states and state-based development strategies in the late twentieth century.

Thinking about futures

Abolish universities?

Most of us know about contemporary abolitionist movements, especially in the United States, which oppose other state agencies that are having toxic effects: police forces and prisons. These are inherently violent institutions, mostly targeting working-class populations and historically repressing working-class movements. They were deeply involved in colonialism and are chronically racist today. Socialists have long argued for abolishing armies, too. Military forces are widely used for repression, generally causing far more death and destruction than they prevent.

Universities are not often seen in the same light. But all these institutions involve delegated forms of state power; and they have all become mixed with the market economy in the neoliberal era. Witness the private prison industry, mercenary armies such as Blackwater or the Wagner group, and the private 'security' industry which is now bigger than government police forces. It's not surprising that some critics have applied abolitionist ideas to universities.

The best-known are Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in the United States, who published an influential essay 'The University and the Undercommons' in 2004, reprised in a book in 2013. They saw US universities as so deeply contaminated with white supremacy and capitalist exploitation that abolition was the only adequate response. Moten and Harney wrote in sweeping cultural-studies style. More recent abolitionist writers (Boggs *et al.* 2019) have paid more attention to the details of US university history and the current economics of universities. But they haven't, as far as I know, turned their ideas into a practical agenda of abolition.

The decisive voice on abolition is surely that of the social groups who were historically shut out of universities, or who are being shut out now. For a great many people, and for generations past, access to flawed universities has been better than access to none. Not just for personal gain, either. Access is also desired for group benefit, and for collective sharing in the social treasure of organised knowledge.

We can see this desire most clearly in the situations where access to universities has been most brutally denied. As I mentioned earlier, every university in Gaza has been wrecked. The surviving heads of the three biggest universities have recently issued a statement saying that some teaching has continued, in unimaginably harsh conditions. They argue that renewal of higher education is 'vital to the survival and long-term future of the Palestinian people'. In 2022, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan banned half the population from universities. They had previously closed secondary schools for girls, stopping them from qualifying for university. Did women want higher education? When they had the offer, between 2001 and 2021, Afghan women's enrolment in higher education had increased spectacularly, almost 20 times over in two decades. There is no question about the desire.

Re-make them?

If we hope to respond to this desire without reproducing the flawed institutions that we currently have, plainly we need an agenda for practical change. I guess any group of people involved with universities has reforms they would like to see, starting next Monday. Here is my own 9-point list, thinking about the Australian context:

1. Election of Vice-Chancellors, Deans and University Councils. A little industrial democracy never went astray!

2. Cap salary differences in universities. No salary should be more than twice the average salary of all higher education workers. Eliminate 'performance bonuses'.

3. Start now to reduce the proportion of casual teaching staff *and* of outsourced labour. Put IR resources into designing credible career pathways for *all* categories of staff.

4. Start immediately to roll back student fees; and announce a target date for abolishing fees.

5. At the same time, start negotiating a long-term Higher Education guarantee, as a social agreement on the sector-wide public funding of HE institutions.

6. End the incredible waste of labour in the ARC/NHMRC system; put at least 50% of research funding into block grants that are made available to *all* research-qualified staff.

7. Ban payments to corporate consultants, ban university advertising, and ban complicity with higher education 'League Tables' (and, if KPMG come onto campus, let down their tyres).

8. Revive University Extension programmes, with the responsibility not only to teach in decentralised settings, but also to *learn from* social groups and cultures currently under-represented.

9. Put expanding resources into LOTE teaching and learning in all universities and colleges.

This list is not entirely random. The proposals build on the picture of major contradictions in the university sector that I sketched earlier. Acting on those contradictions can take shape as practical policies and institutional actions. We should try to identify actions which have a capacity to generate longer-term transformations – an approach that used to be called 'revolutionary reforms'. Even in the heat of policy debates, it's important to remember the long-term goal of more democratic universities, better grounded in social realities and collective needs.

And beyond that, in the blue sky?

I offer no blueprint here, but I do want to encourage inventiveness. The long, global history of higher education is rich in alternatives and inspiration. There have been anti-colonial universities, underground universities, labour colleges, Indigenous universities, women's universities, peasant education movements, teach-ins, free universities, people's science movements, radical student movements on every continent, radical teaching programmes and departments, and academic dissenters of many stripes. Political Economy at the University of Sydney is part of a grand tradition.

This lecture memorialises Ted Wheelwright, a pioneer of research on Australian capitalism, a man who kept socialist ideas alive in this university during the years of the Cold War; and who saw his influence

grow when new generations arrived. I knew Ted a little, and I end my lecture in his cheerful spirit, with three examples from the history of radical invention in advanced education.

The first example is a little over twenty years old. When Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela in 1998, one of his projects was to widen higher education access on a massive scale. The main vehicle was the new Bolivarian University of Venezuela [UBV], launched in 2003. It tried to ground higher education locally in peasant, working-class and tribal communities, spreading 1,800 local classrooms across the country. The university provided bridging courses, free books and free meals. Curriculum and pedagogy were to be re-thought. Local social problems were made the focus of study, and university teachers were supposed to 'accompany' students' learning (it sounds better in Spanish!), rather than lecture at them. That was a large agenda, undertaken in haste, and it hasn't gone smoothly. UBV has faced academic and political opposition, and it seems that the classes haven't generated the excitement that was hoped for. The government is authoritarian and unstable. So UBV may not last much longer. But it has been a conscious attempt to confront one of the central problems about university systems worldwide.

My next story concerns a much smaller but also ambitious project: the Highlander Folk School. This was set up with a small staff in rural Tennessee in the depth of the Great Depression, partly on religious inspiration. The idea was to provide ways for poor farming communities to reflect on their own conditions, trust their own experience, and develop community action. Highlander soon connected with the CIO (the more radical of the two trade union confederations at the time), which was starting to organise workers across the American South. For ten years, Highlander became an important centre of union education and development, offering residential schools, local courses, and other support. This link was broken in the massive right-wing backlash in the early years of the Cold War. But Highlander was already pioneering racial integration in its courses. In the 1950s it became a major resource for the Civil Rights movement, providing education and research for activists across the Southern states. It became important enough that segregationist politicians made a sustained attempt to destroy it, finally shutting down Highlander's original organisation in 1961. But Highlander continued in other forms and it still does. It's a wonderful example of how post-school education can connect with social movements.

My third example is now a hundred years old. In the mid-19th century, the British regime set up European-style universities and colleges in India, as they did in Australia and other colonies. In 1921, Rabindranath Tagore, poet, novelist and public intellectual, set up a different kind of college in Bengal, which he called Visva-Bharati. It was linked to a rural school that taught in the local language, but the college attracted students from other parts of India too. Tagore rejected the Eurocentric curriculum of the official universities. He did not reject European culture and science. Rather, he conceived Visva-Bharati as a meeting-place of civilisations – Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Islamic and European – and invited intellectuals from other countries to participate. I think of Visva-Bharati as a first attempt at a post-colonial world university. It struggled financially, but survived, and after independence became part of the Indian public university system. I hope it survives the current Hindu-supremacist government's attempt to impose their agenda on India's universities.

Problems about universities can feel small compared with the problems of nuclear war, dictatorship, or mass poverty - and less urgent than genocide, the revival of patriarchy, or climate change. Yet universities matter. They are now mass institutions, and they are the main site where intellectual work on those pressing issues is done. I don't regret having spent my working life in universities, though I would rather be handing them on in better shape to the next generations. Best wishes and solidarity to all of you who are carrying the work forward. Be realistic, be bold!

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