**How good are Australian universities?**

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**(Preliminaries)**

[OPENING]

In his biography of R. Douglas Wright, Peter McPhee says that ‘one of the sharpest characteristics of his generation as it emerged from World War II’, was that its grasp of the importance of science was rivalled by ‘a fierce national identity’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Wright’s emphatic individuality, his determination to assert his own rules was, as the former governor-general Ninian Stephen said at the funeral, directed to unselfish ends.[[2]](#footnote-2) As McPhee and Stuart Macintyre’s history of postwar reconstruction show, Wright, Coombes, Conlon and the other intellectuals of the reconstruction generation[[3]](#footnote-3) made a modern university system, and in doing so helped to modernized a nation.

[UNIVERSITIES, AND AUSTRALIA]

That brings me straight to my theme this evening, or rather twin themes, which are Australia, and the universities. In the question ‘how good are Australian universities?’ there are other questions inside. How good are the universities in relation to what? To other universities abroad?

[‘HOW GOOD’]

How good then is Australia itself? And how good have the universities made Australia? We might say that the strengths and weaknesses of Australian universities are the strengths and weaknesses of Australia, that they *must* be the same, but it is not that easy. Though a university is conditioned by its society and nation, it has roots in knowledge and the larger world. It is not wholly contained by the nation. Universities can move out ahead, up to a point, and we often want them to do so.

Why does it matter? Universities are now central to Australia. Citadels of science, makers of society, shapers of lives, or so it seems. The university has become a large and complex institution, with ‘thickening’ connections into the economy, government, civil society and family. The university is also multiple, if not fragmented—as Clark Kerr famously argued[[4]](#footnote-4)— every faculty, each researcher and each interest group are on autonomous trajectories. Or so it seems. What holds it all together? Some say the VC, or the Dean. Others say the global discipline but there are many. I think universities are unified by two heterogeneous qualities that this clever self-perpetuating institutional form brought together in medieval Europe: knowledge, and social weight or gravitas.

[THE LUCKY COUNTRY]

What is Australia, and what are the *Australian* universities? In cultural matters, the 1960s is the decade on which everything turns. The most insightful book about Australia is Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country,* published in 1964. A best-seller. Not bad for a book about ideas, in which the main idea was that the reader had no mind! He wrote about a half-formed national sensibility, transferred from Britain yet out of sorts when it returned to London, oblivious of its geographical location in Asia on which its future turned.[[5]](#footnote-5) Clutching the White Australia policy, which Horne campaigned against.

‘Australia has not been a country of great innovation or originality, he said. It improvised well ‘when pushed’,[[6]](#footnote-6) but ‘has exploited the innovations and originality of others.’[[7]](#footnote-7) ‘Dependent, second-hand, second rate.’[[8]](#footnote-8) It was also profoundly rejective of ideas and intellectuals. Horne’s explanation for Australian anti-intellectualism had two strands. And this might still be relevant. First, Australians had a deeply inlaid scepticism. It made them practical, less prone to self-delusion, and notoriously philistine.[[9]](#footnote-9) Their instinct was to ridicule authority and any claim to distinction or even complexity. Second, Australians also had ‘a passion for egalitarianism’ that translated not into wanting everybody to be clever, but into ‘dislike of cleverness’, with its power to calibrate the group. The meld of scepticism and egalitarianism led Australians to hide their own talent, to frustrate talent in others, to distrust experts and ‘to oversimplify even the simplest issues’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Talented Australians, said Horne, had ‘to appear ordinary, just like everybody else’ or they were stigmatized as ‘not practical’, except sometimes, in the arts and science.

If science was a partial exception to this harsh verdict the universities were not. The humanities were not ‘invigorating’—‘the middle ranges are adequate but there is nothing much at the top.’[[11]](#footnote-11) Australia produced ‘the smallest proportion’ of science and engineering graduates ‘among the prosperous nations’.[[12]](#footnote-12) ‘There are many Australians who know how to conduct research; many of the best go overseas’, he said.[[13]](#footnote-13) R&D spending was abysmally low.

Horne knew less about the universities and research than the media, society, politics and public life. At the very time he was writing Australian universities were expanding rapidly and medical research, led by Wright, Macfarlane Burnet and others, was beginning to flourish. Yet Horne’s larger argument is not so easy to dismiss. ‘Intellectuals’, ‘as a strong and publicly influential type of person… do not exist’, he said.[[14]](#footnote-14) Australia largely lacked a public sphere in the sense of Jurgen Habermas, the network of critical intellectuals, interest groups and strategic thinkers at the edge of the state. The absence of the public sphere left a gulf between campus and government, and in government, said Horne, ‘the sense of the possible is very narrow.’[[15]](#footnote-15)

Horne was largely right, then. The question is, how much he is still right?

[HISTORY]

In a forthcoming book on Australian higher education Glyn Davis describes the start of Sydney and Melbourne. Self-governing under the colonial state. Secular. Comprehensive of the disciplines. Not scholastic, preparing professionals. Utilitarian, like the colonies themselves. More influenced by London and Scotland than Oxford and Cambridge. These foundations set the achievement and the limit. Though the two young universities had shaky moments, their design took root and spread, and for the next century, the successive foundations across the country repeated these core features, with nuances here and there. The outcome of this determined path-dependency was a national system with remarkable homogeneity.

The next key moment in the making of the Australian university was a century later, in R. Douglas Wright’s time, the system building era from the late the 1950s to the 1970s. The universities were lifted from small enclaves, finishing schools for a fraction of the middle class, into the mass educators and research laboratories of today. To the founding template, the system-building years added *accumulation*; of numbers, of functions, of resources, of prestige: the rubric of never ending growth. Like Australian native flora, with no size limits, spreading upwards and outwards to fill the empty spaces on the map. Growth confirmed the founding template, the comprehensive structure.

At this time Wright was an instigator at a succession of historical moments. In 1954 he suggested to Menzies that the Prime Minister establish a commission of inquiry into the universities, which was to be the decisive moment in the Commonwealth’s move into university policy. Wright co-wrote Melbourne’s submission. The final report emphasized the resource needs of faculties of medicine.[[16]](#footnote-16) With Coombes and others he started the ANU, designed as the national research hub and graduate school with a Medical Institute at its heart.[[17]](#footnote-17) He was first chair at Peter MacCallum. He met with Coombes and three major donors to kick-start Howard Florey.[[18]](#footnote-18) Unlike Macfarlane Burnet, he saw no tension between funding research in medical university departments, and flourishing institutes.[[19]](#footnote-19) All had their place.

A decade later Labor’s modernizing Minister John Dawkins took the founding template, with its larger universities, and entrenched and enlarged it further with size targets and mergers, also turning the Australian university into a competitive corporation. Small specialists and colleges of advanced education vanished. The new element was fee-paying international students.

[THE UNIVERSITIES TODAY]

The system building 1960s and 1970s also began the process of continuous transformation of the universities that has pulsated through them ever since.

*[FACTS AND FIGURES]*

Australia enrolled 1.4 million students in 2015, and had 363,000 international students, a massive 26 per cent of all enrolments. Universities received $26.6 billion in income. Funding per student in Australia is now higher than at any time since the early 1990s,[[20]](#footnote-20) but since then there has been a partial shift from teaching to research, within total budgets.

In 2015, 42 per cent the income of Australian universities was from government. Grants based on student fees in the tuition loans system plus other student fees, added to 44 per cent. Of this 20 per cent of income was from international students, £5.3 billion.[[21]](#footnote-21) Bureau of Statistics data show that in 2015-16 the total value of higher education exports, including non-tuition spending by students and their families, was $13.7 billion.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The Australian university system exhibits certain distinctive structural features. First, the preponderance of degree programs: 44 per cent of the domestic population graduates at first degree level or above, with only another 11 per cent in sub-degrees.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Second, Australian universities are large. None is as small as Princeton which has 8000 students. The smallest Australian has 12,000. Some are gigantic, on the scale of Toronto, and the mid-West public flagships in the United States, bigger than any in UK. Melbourne reached 58,883 students in 2015 with an international student load of 15,211. Multi-campus Monash had 70,000 students in 2015, with 21,700 in international load. RMIT, Sydney, New South Wales, Deakin, Queensland and Curtin in WA exceeded 50,000 students. Another six had more than 40,000 students.

Third, as noted, system design rests on uniformity of institutional design. Other countries have more variety in mission: liberal arts in the US, high quality technical and vocational in Germany, South Korea and Taiwan, local colleges focused on teaching, specialist institutions almost everywhere. Instead of competition generating a diversity of submarkets and de-bundled specialist products, as in the market imaginary, multipurpose universities jostle for broad market coverage at the centre of large demand pools in each state capital in the manner of free-to-air commercial television. The old path-dependency and the Dawkins size formula are now locked down by economies of size and scope and a pattern of isomorphic imitation. Innovations in mission are too risky. The Melbourne Model is a rare exception to government-imposed standardization and self-imposed standardization. It is a largely one-dimensional sector.

The universities are strung out in a long vertical line in descending research-intensity, resources and status. Moving down the line, the marketing claims become more hollow as value declines, though price stays the same.

Fourth, whereas many other nations vigorously foster a ‘World-Class’ university layer, in Australia policy, regulation and funding flatten the top universities. The Go8 have the first mover advantage, they are the oldest and strongest and they concentrate much of the research capacity. They have a quarter of the student load but 70 per cent of the academically competitive research funding and 51 per cent of publications.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, they have limited scope to build their position because of the fixed price character of both fees and public subsidies. They can charge higher international student fees than other universities and enrol huge volume. Elite educators at home, mass education abroad. But this creates only a modest advantage overall, as second tier universities can also enrol huge volume.

Melbourne’s international competitors have better income streams. The top British research universities receive large-scale grants for research performance via the REF. There is no extra funding attached to the ERA in Australia. Leading American universities have philanthropic funding and strong federal research support. In Japan, China, Singapore, Germany, and France there is selective distribution of discrete parcels of public funding to augment research. The Go8 maintains the distance from the next tier, like Wollongong, Curtin or QUT but has limited scope to bridge the gap with Imperial or Tokyo.

Fifth, on the other side of the coin, Australia is notable among national systems for the strength of its middle layer of universities. No less than 23 of the 40 Australian universities are in the ARWU global top 500, the Go8 and fifteen more. Middle universities are pulled between the conflicting goals of building volume and building research. Some have niche research profiles, like James Cook and UTS, while others like Curtin are more comprehensive. But they all benefit from the regime that hold down the Go8, and are also allocated funding for research degrees and research infrastructure a little out of proportion to their share of research capacity. The overall effect is to maximise the number of strong branded income earning universities in the global market. The downside is reduced quality at the top.

[INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS]

International comparisons are useful discipline. In corporate-minded universities there always the danger that you will start to believe your own marketing. The road to hubris is paved by focus groups. Realistic comparisons foster humility, which is the beginning of wisdom.

Comparison does not mean imitation. It merely helps us to know where we are located.

*System and structure.* There is no other higher education system in which there is only one basic mission and institutional shape. Australia avoids the extremes of quality in the market diverse American system. The top is weaker but the lower 98 per cent is considerably stronger in Australia. Two thirds of higher education enrolments in Australia are in world top 500 universities. On the other hand, quality in Australia is less uniformly good than in the strong Western European systems such as Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland and the Nordics. In the Dutch system, every research university is good. There is no tail. There is no top 50 university in Holland. Some might see that as a trade-off for the system virtues. I don’t think so. The point is not that Dutch quality is uniform, it isn’t, but that the floor is high. It is possible to combine a high floor of quality with a top 20 university. Germany’s Excellence Initiative signals the desire to achieve such a combination.

*Participation.* In international terms Australia is a high participation country. The participation rate of the 20-24 year age group was 59 per cent in 2015 compared to the OECD average of 42 per cent. But the participation rate is boosted by Australia’s large international student population, which increases the rate of entry into first degrees by 16 per cent.

*Funding*. Student tuition fees are less than those levied in the UK but higher than in the public sector in the US and China, and higher than the whole of Europe. Tuition is free in the Nordic countries and Germany and very low in France. Fortunately for Australians, as is also the case in the UK, there is no charge at the point of entry because fees are covered by income contingent loans, underwritten by the government, that are repaid through the tax system only when income reaches a threshold level. This protects access.

[PROPORTION OF RESEARCH PAPERS THAT HAD INTERNATIONAL CO-AUTHORS, 2008-14]

*Internationalization.* Australians have higher than average levels of international co-publication, though not very high. Australian researchers have especially frequent partnerships with researchers in New Zealand (most of all), South Africa, Singapore, UK, China and Taiwan. Science in Australia has a much stronger relationship with science in China than is the case for British science.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The internationalization of students is more lopsided. The OECD measures stays of one year or more for study purposes. Australia’s number coming in is comparatively high, the number going out is exceptionally low.

In terms of incoming students in 2015, 14 per cent at Bachelor level, 43 per cent Masters level and 34 per cent doctoral level were international. International students were 51 per cent concentrated in business studies and law. In terms of outgoing students, only 0.7 per cent of Australian students were enrolled aboard in 2015. Australia’s ratio of incoming to outgoing students at 24.6 was even higher than 21.3 in the US.[[26]](#footnote-26) It seems that Australian universities need to travel but their students do not. The main opportunity for internationalization is mixing between the international students coming in, and the immobile locals, but unfortunately, while local students are tolerant, they have no special need to open up to new cultures and languages.

[AUSTRALIA IN THE SHANGHAI ARWU TOP 500]

*Research*. The ranking of Australian universities in the ARWU shows the country punching above its weight in the top 500 and top 100 but not the top 40. The Leiden University ranking provides data on papers published in 2012-15 in the top 10 per cent of their field by citation rate. Melbourne produced 1518 such papers, 31st in the world. A fast rising Queensland was 38, Sydney 41, Monash was at 62 and New South at 65.

Given size and historical factors, useful public university comparators for an aspirant Melbourne, with 1518, might be Toronto, UCL, Wisconsin-Maddison, UBC in Canada, National University Singapore and UC Davis.

[NUMBER OF PAPERS PUBLISHED 2012-2015 IN TOP 10% OF THEIR FIELD BY CITATION RATE ]

Harvard’s 7134, more than double Stanford’s 3372 at number two, is mind-blowing. Any global university ranking that says Harvard is not the world’s Everest is either tailored to limited criteria or, like Times Higher and QS, playing commercial games with the sector. But my main point is that the top Australian universities are not Annapurnas.

At discipline level, Australia’s strong meta-cluster is life and medical sciences. In biomedical and health Melbourne is at 22nd in the world with 909 high citation papers, followed by Sydney at 27, Queensland at 46 and Monash at 62. Since the first Leiden ranking six years ago Melbourne has risen from 33 to 22. In Life and Earth sciences Queensland does even better, at 11th, followed by Melbourne 40, ANU 48, UWA 57 and James Cook, with its specialization in tropical and marine, at 58. Australia does less well in physical sciences STEM and mathematics and computing, where UNSW is the strongest.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In 2014, towards the end of his time as Chief Scientist, Ian Chubb—whose informality, prolific swearing and highly successful crash-through style recalled R Douglas Wright—published a report that benchmarked Australian science and engineering, including life and medical, on citation performance. This included CSIRO. Between 2002 and 2012 Australia produced 3.1 per cent of the world’s publications in all fields of science. Looking at top 1 per cent publications by citation rate, the most important papers, Australia produced 9 per cent in earth and planetary sciences, 8 per cent in agricultural and biological sciences, 7 per cent in environmental sciences, 7 per cent in veterinary, 6 per cent in medicine and 5 per cent in immunology and microbiology.[[28]](#footnote-28) Australia’s citation rate was higher than the average for 15 strong EU research countries, in four fields: earth sciences, physical sciences, mathematical sciences and the biomedical and clinical health sciences. In six other fields the Australian citation rate was above the world average rate but below the EU-15 average. This is not a stellar outcome. Sweden and the UK were above the EU-15 average in all fields, the United States in almost all fields, and Canada did rather better than Australia.

[THE INNER UNIVERSITY]

International comparisons are not the only standard of value. The thing must be good in itself. How good is the Australian university in itself, what we can call the inner university? And how good is the Australian university for the society in which it sits, the outer university?

The inner and outer university are not wholly separate. The inner Australian university is partly shaped by its management. In turn management is much affected by government, by the lattice of laws, rules, capital flows, distributional formulae, parcels of money, visa decisions and all the rest of the dense lattice in which the university is embedded. Government is a more complete presence in the Australian university than it is in, say, the American university. Australia is more British than American here.

The state-manager nexus was fundamental to the development of a more professional academic management during the new public management reforms of the 1990s. In the outcome, Australian universities have become very well run or well run. Management reform has underpinned the remarkable business success of international education, and enabled universities to be efficient at a higher level of scale, while maintaining continuing structural changes and a plethora of organizational initiatives and outreach, with less public money per capita.

Be careful what you wish for. I think that Australian universities have become stronger in management and professional services than in academic cultures. I think we see here traces of what Horne talked about—the practivist bias, the instinctive side-lining (or hiding) of the intellectual, that Horne discussed.

To justify this judgement, I will switch back to where I am comfortable, the comparative. As I see it—and there are notable exceptions to this—Australian academic cultures are not as resilient and reproductive, or as intellectually energetic and exciting, as academic cultures in the UK, the American doctoral universities, the leading Dutch universities, or perhaps Singapore. I am sure of this in social sciences, and humanities. It is suggested in the research citation data in some disciplines as we have seen. It may not be true of Medicine, the strongest field in the country in world terms.

In Australia disciplinary cultures are strongest in the top research universities. There management is often more circumspect, professors who raise serious money and win major academic prizes are valued, and some almost write their own rules. This is the triumph of the academic entrepreneur not the college. The collective professoriate and the scholarly meeting have more power in Cambridge, Oxford, the Ivy League and the University of California than in Australia.

What of teaching and learning? Australia, like other English-speaking countries, has expanded quality assurance, student assessment of staff, nomination-based rewards for best teaching, certification of university teachers, research in classrooms, technology-based applications. This has installed a reflexive culture in which improvement in learning is embedded, enabling substantial gains in medical education and elsewhere. The ubiquitous awards are questionable, and there are downsides—like grade inflation and the reluctance some academics feel to challenge their students intellectually in case their ratings fall. But bad teaching is now more likely to be spotted and ironed out.

[THE OUTER UNIVERSITY]

The outer university. In Wright’s time it was hoped that the growth of universities would enable the expansion of equality of educational opportunity across the society, implanting a more meritocratic order in which social mobility would flourish. We now know that despite the inclusive potential of growth it is difficult to change the social balance of the enrolment, not just in Australia but in all large participation higher education systems. In each phase of expansion the middle class families make best use of the new opportunities. In the last decade, despite rapid growth before and after the open demand-driven enrolment system began in 2012,[[29]](#footnote-29) the share of students from the bottom socioeconomic status quartile has moved modestly from 16 to 18 per cent. The rate of inclusion of indigenous students was half their share of the Australian population. In the Go8 in 2014 only 11 per cent of students were from the bottom quartile. The high fee independent schools remained the royal road to academic success, blocking broader social mobility.

Equity is important but hard to progress. However, it is not the only broader public good produced by universities. Much of the larger contribution to society is expressed through the disciplines. Horne might have been pleased with the growth of enrolments in the STEM disciplines. The universities’ larger contribution to scientific literacy is crucial.[[30]](#footnote-30) The RAND Corporation’s *The Global Technology Revolution 2020* found that Australia had an excellent capacity to acquire all 16 of the report’s chosen technologies.[[31]](#footnote-31) Earnings to science degrees are not as high as for the science-based professions but unemployment rates across STEM are low.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The social sciences are more heterogeneous. They mostly developed to provide data and advice for government,[[33]](#footnote-33) and their largest potential contribution is when an activist government is in power. Then they are asked to work on larger projects such as inequality and poverty,[[34]](#footnote-34) or black deaths in custody, or the stolen generation. When governmental torpor sets in, as at present, the social sciences look more fragmented, even trivial.

However there is little the social sciences can do, or the universities can do, to wake a sleeping government. The problem apparent in Horne’s time, the absence of a larger public sphere around government, which might debate, rework and transmit ideas from the universities or elsewhere, in some measure continues. The vacuum also protects the narrowness of the public agenda in Australia, discussed by Horne, which also continues. Government is freed from potential obligation to address a larger set of policy concerns.

Discussion of ideas in the media mostly takes a shallow ideological and combative tone, as if question time in parliament has been carried into the larger public space. Almost before a new issue appears it is simplified and arranged into a left/right polarity, like a tennis match where the sole meaning is to determine a winner. There is little apace for specialized knowledge in a simplified debate, few points of entry for university-based intellectuals.

[THE REGION AND THE WORLD]

Horne argued in relation to national identity that Australians knew they were no longer truly British, but ‘the momentum towards concepts of independent nationhood had slowed down, or stopped.’[[35]](#footnote-35) Also, they needed to discover they were in Asia. Horne stated that focus on Asia could unlock Australia’s stuck-in-transition national identity. This is a prescient overall assessment.

Some matters have changed since *The Lucky Country*. The geo-strategic weight of Asia has increased, specially China and East Asia. The White Australia policy has been dismantled and the demography is being transformed—Australia’s three major sources of migrants, about equally weighted, are China, India and UK/Ireland. National engagement with Asia has vastly expanded on many fronts, with the universities playing a key part.

[NUMBER OF SCIENCE PAPERS 2005-2014: USA, CHINA, OTHER EAST ASIA]

Let’s consider for a moment the rise of Asia, especially China. Global power is becoming more plural. China surpassed the Purchasing Power Parity GDP of the United States in 2014-15. Aggregate R&D spending in East Asia passed North America five years ago. Consider also the quickening expansion of the middle class in East, Southeast and South Asia. Kharas and Gertz for Brookings estimate it was 1.9 billion in 2009 and will rise to 3.3 billion in 2020, with most of the growth in China, India and Indonesia.[[36]](#footnote-36) In 2015 Australia had 107,000 international students from China as well as 33,000 from India, 32,000 from Singapore, 29,000 from Malaysia, 19,000 from Vietnam. The projected growth of the Asian middle class means that on the demand-side international students in Australia will continue to grow. Numbers will fall only if there is a change on the supply side, for example a policy reduction of student visas.

Consider also the scale and speed of the growth of science in China. The annual number of published papers rose from 66,000 in 2005 to 257,000 in 2014, multiplying by four times. China’s output moved from 25 per cent that of the United States in 2005 to 80 per cent in 2014,[[37]](#footnote-37) and will soon pass the US in volume. The number of universities from mainland China in the ARWU top 500 has grown from eight in 2005, to 45 in 2017. From eight to 45 in twelve years.

[HIGH CITATION PAPERS, IN TOP 10% OF RESEARCH FIELD, IN MATHS AND PHYSICAL SCIENCES, 2012-2015 (LEIDEN DATA) ]

Quality is improving at the same time as quantity. The table lists the leading universities in the physical sciences side of STEM, a measured by the number of papers published in 2012-2015 in the top 10 per cent of their field. China had *more than half the top 15* universities in Mathematics and Computing. Tsinghua was well ahead in first place, with Singapore’s Nanyang University of Technology second. The highest placed American university, MIT was fifth. Physical Sciences and Engineering the US was stronger but both China and the US had five of the top 15. The two Singapore universities were in the top 15 in both clusters. Has the world shifted and changed recently? You bet. When the two columns are aggregated *Tsinghua just shades MIT as the world’s top STEM university*. China has very nearly caught up in STEM. With its researchers publishing in a second language. However, that China is not as strong in biological sciences and medicine.[[38]](#footnote-38)

[COMBINING ALL HIGH CITATION PAPERS IN MATHS, COMPUTING, PHYSICAL SCIENCES, ENGINEERING, 2012-2015 (LEIDEN DATA) ]

Of universities from the English-speaking countries, the Australians were the first into China. Some have developed formidable practical expertise. Large initiatives such as the combined Monash-South Eastern University graduate school, and the University of New South Wales’s Torch project, supported by the Chinese government, will have long term effects. In their work in the Asian region the universities have moved out ahead of Australia to an extent. In turn this has helped to bring Australia along.

The universities’ Asian engagement is also subject to the same limitations as Australia’s general relationship with the region, to a lesser degree. There are tendencies to focus on short-term returns not long-term relationships; to see East Asia as a commercial opportunity without regard for cultural engagement; and to under-estimate the importance of Asian languages, especially but not only Putonghua. Much of the hard work is still ahead.

Geography is decisive in the long run. The long-term encounter and hybridization between the Chinese civilizational zone and the Anglo-American-European zone is the main vector in which the future world society will emerge. India will also play a role which as yet is indeterminate. Australia’s own Europe/Asia tension and resolution are a sub-set of the larger problem. Some of the issues are arising earlier here. That’s a potential advantage. The East/West sensibility that Australians acquire could equip them to play a larger global role—*if* they do engage fully in East Asia and build a partly hybridized outlook. The universities are essential to that national project. But do the universities contain sufficient originality and independence of thought to contribute to a new kind of nation at the forefront of historical change? That’s ‘how good’ Australia need its universities to be.

[CONCLUDING THOUGHTS]

In summary, how good are Australian universities? They are large, often multi-site, comprehensive and internally diverse. This allows them to take on multiple roles. They are very good at managing large international student intakes from Asia, at least on the servicing side. (The educational side is less clear). Some Australian universities have developed deep expertise in relation to China. On the whole, Australian universities very well led and managed, and tend to make the most of their capacity, insofar as universities ever do that. Australia has 23 universities in the world top 500, exceptional given the size of the country. There is a large robust group of second tier universities that bring research-informed degrees to a broad segment of the Australian population. The universities harbour pockets of high global excellence in certain sub-fields in research, including plant and animal research, medicine, related biological sciences and earth sciences. Field by field citation quality is less consistent than in Canada, the UK and smaller systems in Northwestern Europe.

The weaker features of Australian universities are the reverse of thestrengths. Outgoing student mobility is abysmal and the ratio of incoming to outgoing students is the highest in the OECD. The uniformity in institutional mission, structure and culture, though similar to Australian public provision in other spheres, is unique in the higher education world. The absence of diversity, particularly specialist public institutions, is a serious weakness. Market competition and government policy and regulation both foster uniformity. In addition, the system settings flatten the leading universities somewhat. Australia has only one top 40 university. Below the large middle group in the second tier there is a long tail of institutions that are nominally research universities but have modest evidence for the claim. On the whole, in comparative terms, academic cultures in Australian universities may be less strong than university management and professional services.

All is not well, either, in the broader context of the universities. Horne’s 1964 charge that Australia lacks originality and creativity in many domains, and has no respect to talent, has become ‘lacks *sufficient* originality, creativity and respect for talent.’ Some of the cultural blockages Horne identified are partly still there. There is not enough regard for intellectual achievement. Strident American anti-science politics are unlikely to gain traction in Australia; the problem is, rather, marginalization and indifference. The public sphere surrounding government—the sphere of intelligent discussion and debate about matters of science, policy and the public interest—is under-developed, by comparison with, say, the UK, United States and parts of Western Europe. This inhibits the potential for autonomous Australian intellectual culture and limits the scope for universities and their people to exercise strong agency in government. Though universities make many contributions to government at an instrumental level, there are invisible barriers to deeper influence, except perhaps in relation to Australia’s engagement with Asia.

If the larger public sphere is successfully fostered, the conditions open up. The solution is not more university marketing at the public, which can appear inauthentic. It is pursuing authentic content-related agendas cleverly to as to gain traction in an arid public setting. The universities must persist with contributions based on knowledge and expertise, that’s what they do. At the same time, there are issues of values that need to be addressed. Though the universities are connected to society at many points, public, policy and university discourse now place undue emphasis on the contributions of universities in the form of private benefits for individuals. I believe more attention should be given to the broader public goods that universities create.

To the conclusion. R Douglas Wright and Donald Horne each supplied the Australian universities with one of the two strategic tools they need to lift themselves, to lift their contribution to Australia, and thereby lift Australia, and lift its contribution to the world. Horne said ‘engagement with Asia will be ‘the creative liberating element in Australia’ the source of a new and more confident national project.[[39]](#footnote-39) Wright’s vision was about the university as ‘a self-governing centre of untrammelled debate’ and ‘the role of the intellectual in contributing to the quality of citizenship’ in the country.[[40]](#footnote-40) He saw the university as a distinctive community ‘based on freedom of inquiry but with special social responsibilities’.[[41]](#footnote-41) If Australian universities can get the freedom right, and the social responsibilities right, and Asia right, that might be enough.

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10. Horne, pp .47-48, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Horne, pp. 223-224. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Horne, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Horne, pp. 142-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Horne, p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Horne, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. McPhee, p. 114 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Foster and Varghese (1996), pp. 3-33 and p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. McPhee, p. 90 and p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. McPhee, p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Norton (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. DET (2017b). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ABS (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. OECD (2017), p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. DEET (2017c, 2017d). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. NSF (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. OECD (2017), p. 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Leiden University (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Chubb (2014), p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Kemp and Norton (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Torok and Holper (2017), p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Torok and Holper, p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Torok and Holper, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Macintyre (2010), pp. 1-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Macintyre (2010), p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Horne, pp. 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Kharas and Gertz (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. UNESCO (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Leiden University (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Horne, pp. 247-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. McPhee, p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. McPhee, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)