

## Is there a parallel between GM and Australian universities?

Noel Smyth\*

Much has been made, for at least 20 years now, of the need to keep increasing the number of students in higher education, the main reason being given that it is good for the economy to have a better-educated workforce. This view is not restricted to Australia, but is repeated in most countries. At the same time a view has arisen that one of the main roles of universities is as an export industry to bring in a large number of overseas students paying large fees. Both of these attitudes started during the tenure of John Dawkins as education minister in Canberra. These views have become so entrenched that it is regarded as unacceptable to question them. Having observed the changes in universities since I started as a post-doctoral fellow and then lecturer in the late 1980s, trends and issues are clear to me.

The original motivation for declaring universities to be an export industry was to solve the financial implications of a large increase in student numbers and the conversion of Colleges of Advanced Education into universities. The obvious motivation of the latter was to point to the resulting increase in the number of degrees, all achieved with little effort. At a political level, this was an ideal solution as no thought or effort was required into what funding should be allocated to universities and no money needed to be taken from areas with more vocal public support.

It was such an ideal political solution that all political parties subscribed to it. The justification given was that country  $X$ , usually the United States, has  $y\%$  of the population with degrees and look how much better they are doing economically! I have a deep connection with the university system in the United States and it is clear to me that this is a completely erroneous analysis of the higher-education system in the United States, however appealing it is politically. The whole point of the higher-education system in the United States is that it has a vast range of levels, ranging from two-year colleges to the leading research universities in the world, meaning that everyone can find the level that is suitable to him or her.

If even a cursory study is made of many of the leading innovators in science and business in the United States, it is clear that it is the top level of universities, which provide an outstanding education, which is producing these people. These leading universities jealously guard their standards and make great play of this. Let us contrast this with the situation in Australia. To push larger and larger numbers of students through and actually pass them, it has been necessary to continually lower standards, often justified in the name of 'diversity' or by saying that this is producing 'equality'.

---

\*School of Mathematics and Maxwell Institute for Mathematical Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK. E-mail: [N.Smyth@ed.ac.uk](mailto:N.Smyth@ed.ac.uk)

Let us consider an analogy. What would the public reaction be if, in the name of equality, the standards required for entry into the Australian Institute of Sport were continually lowered. Maybe even to the extent of allowing someone without any ability in sport, like me, to enter? Or in the name of equality, anyone could enter the Olympic team. This would be regarded as unacceptable. How is intellectual ability and commitment any different? The word elite is used with great pride for sport, but is a term of abuse for universities. Why? So the real conclusion is that it is the quality of education which matters, not statistics on degree numbers.

As no government has wanted to fund the increase in student numbers, the universities have been forced to keep increasing the numbers of full-fee-paying students. The sad effect of this is that the ability to pay large fees is the entry criterion, rather than ability and commitment. During my travels to many countries I have encountered some interesting results of this. Last year I was in India for a conference and the hotel delivered a number of Indian newspapers each day. In one paper one day there was an article on Australian universities. One Indian student in Australia was quoted as saying that in Australia 'you can go to a third rate university where it is impossible to fail and then become a taxi driver'. Is this really the reputation which Australian universities want? At another conference a mathematician from Chile found out that I was Australian and started to relate a tale to me that she found disturbing. She said that this marketing team from Australian universities came Santiago and advertised Australian degrees, with a meeting to be held at some hotel. All these local Chilean students turned up expecting scholarships, and left in droves when they found out what the universities actually wanted.

The message of these two anecdotes is that in becoming driven to find more and more full-fee-paying students, the universities have resorted to marketing and PR, which has undermined their core mission of high class education. This has degenerated to the extent that the universities eventually get a bad reputation in a given country and then have to desperately search for countries in which they are not known. This cannot continue forever as eventually you run out of countries.

The retiring vice-chancellor of Monash University has stated that there is an 'over-dependence on international students in Australia', that 'the education of international students in Australia is totally desirable for all sorts of reasons, but we do depend too much on the income from those students to support the education of Australian students' and that 'Australian universities are not as competitive as they used to be' [1]. To again return to the United States experience, if you are a great university you do not need much marketing, the outstanding students come to you. In the end the ability to pay large fees has no relation to your ability to benefit from a top quality university education.

All these thoughts relate back to the analogy with General Motors (GM). In the end all the marketing in the world will not help you if you get a reputation for a poor quality product. Do Australian universities really want to go the way of GM? So what is the solution? This is much harder than relating the problems.

It is clear that any solution is a long term process. One is that the realisation needs to be made that different people have abilities in different areas. The key to

the education system is to allow individuals to find out what these are and be able to exploit them. This does not mean that everyone or  $x\%$  of the population has to go to university or that the universities have to churn out a uniform product. In the end the actual degree certificate means nothing. It is the education behind it that matters.

As well as this general aspect, there also needs to be the political courage to actually confront what is adequate funding for education by the Commonwealth and State governments without having universities trawling the world for anyone who can pay large fees. There are few things more important than education. Does Australia really want to be a country whose sole economic activities are digging holes in the ground and building ever more houses until the whole country is covered in both? Could not creating world leading universities actually inspire Australians with the capacity to benefit from the education and give them the tools and background to create new industries, as happens with the leading universities in the United States? Australia needs to think these fundamental issues through without resorting to the expedient solution or the cheap solution.

## References

- [1] ABC News web site, 1 July, 2009.  
Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/07/01/2614142.htm>.



Professor Smyth received his BSc from the University of Queensland and his PhD from the California Institute of Technology. He has held post-doctoral positions at the California Institute of Technology, the University of Melbourne and the University of New South Wales and lectureships at the University of Wollongong and the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He is currently Professor of Nonlinear Waves at the University of Edinburgh and holds visiting professorships at the University of Wollongong and the National Autonomous University of Mexico. His major research interest is in nonlinear waves and solitons, with his current emphasis being nonlinear optics. He has published 84 papers on nonlinear waves and a broad range of other areas of applied mathematics.