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The Australian Idea of a University

Edited by Glyn Davis
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Glyn Davis, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, is an influential and frequent participant in Australian public debate – such as it is – about higher education. *The Australian Idea of a University* ("Idea") is his second book-length contribution on the topic, following the 2010 series of radio lectures published as *The Republic of Learning*. In a prologue and five short chapters, Idea offers a potted history of Australian universities from the foundation of the University of Sydney in 1850 to the present day, in order to explore how "shared origins, student expectations, academic culture and federal regulation contribute to a single idea of an Australian university" (2). This history is not a mere chronicle: it comes with a warning and some recommendations for policy change. The warning is about the vulnerability of Australian higher education to threats from e-learning "providers": "if Australian public universities are more alike than different, then disruption from Silicon Valley may affect the whole sector, simultaneously" (30). The suggestions, elaborated and justified in the book's last chapter, concern the desirability of "a single policy perspective over the post-school sector, funding for teaching and research that reflects actual costs" – as the surrounding discussion makes clear, Davis is actually urging higher student fees – and "the creation of new universities to accommodate growth" (121).

Davis' opening chapter places the advent of online learning in the context of earlier economic cycles of "creative destruction". The second chapter discusses the establishment of Australia's first universities in Sydney and Melbourne, which Davis sees as initiating the path dependency that has shaped the subsequent history of the country's higher education system. In the third chapter, he describes the origins of different regional and suburban institutions. Chapter four mainly concerns the far-reaching reforms of the 1980s, a key source of the current un-Darwinian uniformity that he deplores. The final chapter makes the case for the changes Davis wants to see.

How to understand this work on Australian universities, written by someone with almost unequalled control over one of them? Not, apparently, as original research – while Davis' book can usefully serve as a concise, though unadventurous, primer in the official history of Australian higher education, it contains little that is new, and nothing that is seriously developed, by way of either research or analysis. Davis simply ignores some of the most important recent work on Australian universities: the reader will not find Forsyth's 2014 history of the modern Australian university cited anywhere in the book, nor Richard Hil's two extremely important – and critical – essays in qualitative sociological analysis. John O'Brien's 2015 history of the National Tertiary Education Union is similarly missing. In reading Davis, the naive reader would not gain any

inkling of the existence of an entire canon in "critical" university studies: classic voices, such as Pierre Bourdieu or Henry Giroux, let alone lesser known ones, simply do not figure. The occasional critics of contemporary universities admitted into Davis' references are far outnumbered.

This partiality is regrettably cavalier, but it is readily explained if we see *The Australian Idea of a University* as, precisely, official history, requiring the marginalisation of dissenting voices. Davis wants the future of Australian universities to be like their recent past – the cumulative result of the decisions of high-level academic and political decision makers, such as himself, who can mostly ignore what others think. Essential for the credibility of this bureaucratic voluntarist vision is the implicit demonstration that the entrenched class of university administrators to which Davis belongs has done a good job up to now, and so can be trusted to keep going. As a result, Davis' narrative ignores the existence of any fundamental disagreement over his own preferred model of higher education. Chronic underfunding, the effective abolition of collegial governance, the problems of casual employment, the ubiquitous managerial stranglehold over academic work in Australian universities – none of these has any real place in Davis' narrative. The impact of political choice on university policy is consistently mystified as an objective, inalterable necessity: Davis refers uncritically to the "need to do well in rankings" (114), as though this "need" was a law of nature, not a contested political decision; part-time work is presented as a "necessity" for students, and no mention is made of governments' eminently political decisions about the subsidisation of study from which its necessity derives: Davis simply takes it for granted that universities will be "compliant public agents" in their relation to government (111). At a time when Australian universities have been forced to grapple with the shocking entrenchment of rape culture in residential colleges, Davis' reference to the "quaint rituals" of bygone days – namely, college students "throwing each other into the lake, or braving the £2 fine for plucking a camelia on campus" (55) – serves as a trivializing historical distraction from an urgent problem.

By the end of Idea, the reader comes to understand that there is basically no structural aspect of contemporary higher education in Australia with which Davis has any really serious quarrel – except, of course, its uniformity. The book synthesizes a managerialist and conformist conception of the university – a bowdlerised vision which systematically evades any exploration of fundamental principles like "merit" or "education", both of them frequently mentioned, but never scrutinised. Neither the National Union of Students, nor the National Tertiary Education Union, two structural sources of dissent, rates a single mention. In an argument where the advent of online educators is emphasised, it is remarkable that Davis has no analysis whatsoever of qualitative differences between online and face-to-face learning, and no exploration of what learning, teaching, research or scholarship actually are, or are for, other than meeting the professional needs of society. Far more than his earlier *Republic of Learning,* Davis' understanding remains trapped in a narrow service-provision model of tertiary education. In this light, his plea for reform of the higher education "industry" will be grist to the mill of the dominant political and economic forces intent on the further neoliberalization of Australian public universities, a transformation for which Davis has himself been a powerful and astute advocate.

This self-congratulatory and Polyannaish exploration of an "idea" is dismaying for its robust immunity to critical perspectives and its acquiescence to the standing injustices and irrationalities of the reality of Australian universities. When prominent and influential academic leaders like Davis venture into the public sphere, they have an obligation to set an example by offering us something more rigorous than this.

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