

Shifting the boundaries: the University of Melbourne 1975–2015

Carolyn Rasmussen

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In 2013, when I first entered the field of higher education history as the researcher for an exhibition to mark the 160th anniversary of the University of Melbourne, I drew upon John Poynter and Carolyn Rasmussen's *A Place Apart* heavily. It chronicles expertly the life of the university through the “decades of challenge” from the 1930s to the early 1980s. Now, twelve years after that volume appeared in print, Rasmussen has published a successor, picking up threads from the late 1960s and bringing the story to 2015. It, too, will become a touchstone for those who seek to understand Melbourne's history.

If the middle decades of the twentieth century were “decades of challenge” for the University of Melbourne, Rasmussen depicts the decades that straddle the turn of the millennium as a time of “shifting the boundaries”. This book shows how the institution went from being “a place apart” to a mass educator whose hallowed halls might have lost some of their mystique – but also a university that is focused on engagement locally and internationally. Some would say engagement policies have, at times, been to the detriment of the university's core mission, and Rasmussen incorporates discontented voices alongside the university's champions. Parts of this book feel celebratory, and some achievements certainly merit celebration, but this is a well-rounded account that gives space to dissent and to failures alongside successes. There will be staff and students to dispute some of Rasmussen's assessments, especially as memories are still fairly fresh – one of my quibbles is below – but this account is clear and thoughtful. Melbourne has stood at the forefront of change in the higher education sector, for good or ill, and Rasmussen is crisp and measured in her judgements.

Shifting the Boundaries is divided into five sections, each one for a decade. You might raise a quizzical eyebrow and wonder if I have made a typo, because the book's subtitle alludes to the four decades between 1975 and 2015. The first section, however, takes in the decade before 1975 to set up the narrative. In specifying 1975–2015 on the cover, Rasmussen is not indicating a rigid time restriction; rather, she is signalling her distinctive approach of using the middle year of five successive decades to take stock of how the university changed and evolved.

Within each of these five sections are four chapters, the titles of which remain the same: campus; students and staff; governance; engagement. Every section opens with the “campus” chapter, which demonstrates how university histories can be told not just as stories of leaders or of high ideals, but also as stories of place and of the built environment. The memories of Melbourne's students are rarely defined by the policy documents or council minutes that tend to populate the citations of institutional histories. Student memories often emphasise place, whether it is walking through the historic Old Quad, becoming lost trying to find a tutorial room in any one of the larger buildings, reading in the System Garden, attending a market or gig in North Court, or drinking and smoking on South Lawn.



Rasmussen is attentive to these experiences and how physical changes affected generations of students.

Rasmussen's effective structure allows the reader to choose how they want to read the book. The governance chapters plot neatly how managerialism swept through the university and defined higher education as a private benefit rather than a community investment. The chapter for 1996–2005 is especially good, interrogating the failure of Melbourne University Private, while also showing that it was just one part of Alan Gilbert's legacy, a corrective to perspectives that tie his tenure as vice-chancellor solely to that endeavour. Rasmussen has an eye for a good anecdote, with the chapters on staff and students containing many of the most well-chosen. Some are humorous, especially those of "barely sober" lecturers; others are poignant, recounting experiences of loneliness and isolation.

One of the most obvious examples of Melbourne shifting the boundaries is the introduction of the Melbourne Model of "new generation" degrees from 2008. Rasmussen shows how bold this vision was, and she explains how comprehensively it affected the university. But there are some aspects that are downplayed or missing. *Shifting the Boundaries* gives relatively little time to student voices on this topic (e.g. p. 264, pp. 279–280) – there are a lot of statistics about enrolments instead. On p. 264, the students who experienced the first year of the Melbourne Model in 2008 appear as slightly annoyed but proud pioneers. This does not quite accord with my recollection. I commenced my studies at Melbourne as a second-year in 2007, having left the University of Queensland in search of better live music and less humidity. I would have, without question, preferred Monash above Melbourne had I moved to Victoria a year later; so, too, many of my friends and acquaintances felt fortunate to enter Melbourne "just in time". We pitied those who commenced the next year. Some of us later came to appreciate many aspects of the Melbourne Model, myself included, not least because I taught within it from 2011; positive perspectives, like those recounted on p. 279, outweighed negative ones among my students. But the book does not capture the strength of disdain or disappointment that university entrants held for the Melbourne Model – and, in some cases, for Glyn Davis personally – when it was first announced. Dissenting voices are presented as a predictable "chorus of doomsayers" (p. 300). There is a somewhat perplexing passage (p. 301) that notes a slight rise in first preferences for Melbourne in 2008, and also gloating from senior Monash figures that they picked up many talented students who would have otherwise gone to Melbourne. The tension between these statements is not examined.

Miegunyah Press, an imprint of Melbourne University Publishing, has done a good job producing *Shifting the Boundaries*. It is a solid hardback with illustrations throughout. The main text is complemented with a useful timeline, an introduction by Glyn Davis written near the end of his tenure as vice chancellor, and an afterword by former provost Peter McPhee, who provides a salutary reflection about there being "no one correct model of management". Rasmussen not only tells the recent history of the University of Melbourne effectively, but positions it within the economic, social, and political currents of the time. *Shifting the Boundaries* is very readable, and deserves notice not only from higher education historians, but from all of those whose interests intersect with Melbourne University.

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