

*“The Lost Ideal” was published in the Sydney University student newspaper **honi soit** on Tuesday, 3 October 1967. It was the foundation manifesto of what was to become known as the Free U, initially operating out of rented premises in Redfern before moving to premises in nearby inner suburbs. The first Free U courses commenced in December 1967, and early in the new year involved 150 people. At its peak, during the summer of 1968-1969, over 300 people were involved in courses. The Sydney experiment, which closed in 1972, stimulated others to attempt something similar in Adelaide, Armidale, Brisbane, Hobart, and Melbourne. Experimentation took place, but as far as I can surmise, Sydney Free U was the only one to actually get off the ground with separate purpose-rented off-campus premises, an extensive curriculum, and the involvement of a significant number of people.*

Rowan Cahill

THE LOST IDEAL

The official institutions of government, the political parties and the dominant economic organisations have opted out of the tasks of planning social change and directing social reform. In this situation of random social initiatives, the university has a unique and strategic position in directing the future patterns of Australian society.

It is right that the university should be closely involved with the rest of the society around it. Ideals of leisurely, isolated communities of scholars have no relevance to the situation today. The university can't do its research without large amounts of money; the economy can't do without the trained people it gets from the universities; the country's cultural life is half carried by the universities. But this involvement has gone wrong.

Finance for research and teaching carries direct and indirect control of the nature of the research and teaching. On the teaching side this is shown by the immediate effects of the federal Government decision to cut the financial recommendations of the Australian Universities' Commission. Finance for the University of New South Wales has now been repaid by the use of that institution to give degree status to military training at Duntroon. Research in the universities is increasingly sponsored by outside authorities, companies, and governments: in three universities, under direct contract to the military. Businesses are heavily represented on university governing bodies such as the Sydney University senate. And curiously, it is difficult to get research money for socially explosive issues such as education, poverty, and race relations.

Training for the economy is the de facto centre of the university's operations. Students flow in from the public examinations and flow out clutching tickets to membership in the occupational elite. Through the university a semi-closed upper status perpetuates itself from one generation to the next, preserving the lines of privilege which universal secondary education was thought to destroy. Because their attention is on getting good jobs, the mass of students are insulated from the academic culture of the university and from the radical traditions of student life and thought.

The university is supposed to be a centre of creativity and cultural progress. In some fields it is; yet in others it pounds narrowly within old walls. In the history of the Power Bequest we see a superb example of the mangling of advanced artistic ideas by

the university machinery. Money left for the purpose of setting up a centre for modern art has been gradually converted to establishing an orthodox department teaching art history.

The universities do creative and worthwhile things: Arts Festival, individual research, group research et al. Australian universities have not reached the position of custodian of political orthodoxy that the Russian universities have; nor experienced the demoralising involvement in the centre of the corporate state of American universities. Neither do they have the corresponding virtues of intensity and variety which the best parts of these two systems achieve. Their limited resources of creation are turned inwards and shelter in spots of the structure. Over the broad range of Australian society, our universities are profoundly conservative influences; unconscious agencies of the preservation of the structure of conformity and privilege which dominates Australian life.

University, students, and staff

Probably one in a hundred people who pass through the university get a university education in the proper sense of the term. The vast bulk of students, whether they pass or do not pass, never engage themselves with their university. They skim a little of the technical information at the top of their lecturer's pool, and pass on. Failure of engagement, not laziness or lack of ability, is the major cause of the heavy failure rates traditional in first-year subjects. The reasons for it are extremely complex. They go back to the students' prolonged training in forced-feed learning techniques in the exam-ridden secondary schools; they are found in the pressure of numbers on limited staffs, in the commuter basis of university life, in the occupational motivation of students, in the university's lack of a coherent internal culture.

The students' side is only one of a two-sided problem. Seen from the other side, the students coming into the university are put through a pre-structured processing, which has more similarities than are funny with the processing of chickens in a mass hatchery. The courses, course materials, course content, learning rate, and learning method are all prescribed in advance. This method rules out any serious consideration of the students as individuals or as social groups, and any possibility of student contribution to curricula and teaching procedures. The system produces the largest number of reasonably processed items compatible with a certain level of investment. Discussions of the university's progress recite ad nauseam the figures of annually increased output. The teaching relationship itself is bureaucratised: an understandable, but wrong, response to the pressure of numbers.

The teachers floundering in this situation, it is often forgotten, were never trained for the job they are doing. Specialists in their disciplines, they are rank amateurs at the specialised and difficult tasks of tertiary education. Few even have any educational philosophy, few have any understanding of the rest of the educational system, few have any training in teaching techniques; fewer yet have a real grasp on their problems as educational problems. Many want to break out of the constrictions of the present system, but do not know how to. "Professional" attitudes can be a barrier to contact with students, as some staff members regard it as beneath their dignity to fraternise with students and frown on junior staff who do. Others are held back by pressures of time and accustomed procedures.

Size, haste, and custom prevent the university from being a place for the education of persons as well as a place for the training of experts. Higher education should mean attention to values, consideration of ends as well as development of means. Yet, the opportunities for this kind of education, which involves a personal interaction between student and teacher, are very slight in the existing system.

If the university were more concerned with the education of students and less with the teaching of palaeotaxonomy, what kind of subject matter would it be concerned with? All of its present range, for part of a higher education is a close engagement with some intellectual discipline. And much more: for it should apply the force of its intellectual techniques to the issues and questions which its students live with. What are the sources of racial violence? What is prejudice? Why do humanitarian ideologies become the packet blurb for systems of mechanised violence? Who wins wars? What are the limits of justifiable dissent? How far do personal responsibilities extend in premarital intercourse? How valuable is the insight gained with drugs? Do you break yourself against the system, fit in, or drop out? The more personally relevant these issues are, the more they require ethical judgment interwoven with systematic analysis. The university as it is now just cannot deal with this kind of question. Hence its blank irrelevance to many students.

When the students themselves make a stand on the basis of their own beliefs and analysis, they are tolerated until they try to do something about that stand. American students have described this by saying that the universities will not tolerate "consequential" action—they will let the students do anything except what has real consequences. Here it is not so much the universities as right-thinking elements outside which keep the students and their projects in line. In Brisbane recently it has been by physical force, courtesy of the Police Dept. In Sydney on various occasions, the same. In towns visited by the SAFA freedom ride, it has been by a quiet whispering campaign warning the aborigines off anything which was suggested by these communists from Sydney. In the case of medical aid for Vietnam, it has been by highly-publicised parliamentary manoeuvre. It is not the university administrations which conduct the attacks on student action; but the university administrations, and most of the staff, cannot defend student action because they are morally half-way to the position of its attackers, largely because they have little contact with student activities.

University and academic disciplines

The university works better as a research institution than as a teaching one. This is not surprising, given the markedly higher prestige of research over teaching and the inability of staff to give adequate time to both.

What research is done is determined by two things: the training and interests of the research worker (or his supervisor if he is a graduate student), and the availability of a sponsor willing to give money for the specific job. One university (N.S.W.) has pioneered the commercial sale of research; research-to-order is still underdeveloped in the rest. Research to order is one thing; research to need is another. There are in fact research fields of high importance in which the universities do not begin to approach adequacy: curriculum development; educational sociology; social psychiatry; war-and-peace research; mass media. The resources are, by chance, directed elsewhere.

The subjects and forms of study are in fact canalized by the social structure of the academic disciplines. Knowledge itself is bound up in the form of organisation, and is segmented. The subject-discipline-department form of organisation, now strongly entrenched, makes it difficult to organise research on problems which cut across the boundaries of disciplines, problems which have produced new fields of study which the university can be slow to recognise. Some fields, such as computer work and microbiology, have been accepted readily; others, such as education, have only slowly been recognised; others again, such as sociology, are barely recognised yet. The development of knowledge waits on the feuds and rivalries between departments.

A free university

The universities at present splutter as centres of research, fail as means of education, and march backwards as agents of social change. There is no simple explanation for this; it relates at one and the same time to the students' origins and destinations, to the internal structure of the universities, and to the pattern of their involvement with a complacent society. Similarly, there is no simple solution. But it rests on all people who are concerned with the universities, and to whom this analysis appears in essentials correct, to find some alternative. Attempts at moderate reform within the university have come to nothing, and there is little prospect of significant change in the near future. The situation demands some radical initiative: there is a great need for a place where students and staff can experiment with solutions to these dilemmas.

Such an experiment would amount, we feel, to a Free University. The term comes from America, where Free Universities have been in operation for a number of years, but the concept is almost as old as the idea of a university community itself.

The idea of a Free University is this: it is free in spirit, not in cash--it will get no government grants, no scholarship scheme. It grants no degrees and offers no status. It is a small group of students and teachers who come together outside the established university system because they find that system inadequate. It takes on the major tasks of a university--advanced research and advanced-level teaching related to its research--but extends its interests to issues and subject-matters frozen out of regular university courses. It is based on co-operation instead of competition; it breaks down the formal role-division of student and staff, inferior and superior; and experiments with teaching methods. Ultimately, it stands or falls by the enthusiasm of its members.

ROWAN CAHILL
BOB CONNELL
BRIAN FREEMAN
TERRY IRVING
BOB SCRIBNER

For the Committee for a Free University.