

**THE HUMANITIES
AND THE
NATIONAL RESEARCH AND EDUCATION AGENDA**
—
JOHN BYRON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF THE HUMANITIES

BUSINESS/HIGHER EDUCATION ROUND TABLE

—
HIGHER EDUCATION SYMPOSIUM:
PUTTING REFORM INTO PRACTICE

MELBOURNE
25TH-26TH NOVEMBER 2003

John Byron's education initially focused on maths and sciences, including a period in medical school, which he left in the interest of public safety. He eventually returned to higher education, where he has worked in several capacities. He has taught Literature, Cinema and Literary Theory at the Universities of Sydney and Wollongong, and worked as a policy advisor at institutional and national levels. In 2001 he was President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations. Before moving to the Academy of the Humanities he was Senior Project Officer to MCEETYA's Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board. He has an honours degree in English Language and Literature from the University of Adelaide and is currently completing his PhD at the University of Sydney.

Introduction

I want to open with a few lines from *Norwegian Wood*, the bestselling novel by Haruki Murakami. For the benefit of those who haven't read it, the narrator is reflecting on his passage into adulthood in the late 'sixties in Japan.

Without warning, she asked me, "Hey Watanabe, can you explain the difference between the English present subjunctive and the past subjunctive?"

"I think I can," I said.

"Let me ask you, then, what possible use is stuff like that for everyday life?"

"None at all," I said. "It may not serve any concrete purpose, but it *does* give you some kind of training to help you grasp things in general more systematically."

Midori gave that a moment's serious thought. "You're amazing," she said. "That never occurred to me before. I always thought of things like the subjunctive case and differential calculus and chemical symbols as totally useless. A pain in the neck. So I've always ignored them. Now I have to wonder if my whole life has been a mistake."

"You've ignored them?"

"Yeah. Like, for me, they didn't exist. I don't have the slightest idea what 'sine' and 'cosine' mean."

"That's incredible! How did you pass your exams? How did you get into university?"

"Don't be silly," said Midori. "You don't have to know anything to pass entrance exams!"¹

I'm not going to discuss today the adequacy of university entrance criteria, although like most people here I have a few informed views on the question. My purpose is to illustrate that the value to society of its members being adequately educated across the range of disciplines – to be broadly literate in the major forms of knowledge – is a function of much more than the specific application of that knowledge in the immediate term. That's point one. Point two is that this is as true of the Sciences as it is of the Humanities: "the subjunctive case, differential calculus and chemical symbols." All advanced forms of expert knowledge are vulnerable to charges of irrelevance simply because their application is not obvious to the casual outside observer (or the unimaginative undergraduate). Point three is that most education does serve some kind of concrete purpose, just not necessarily when or in the way you might imagine it will: the first translation into English of *Norwegian Wood* was made for use in-country by Japanese students studying our language. Were its translator not proficient in the application of the subjunctive mood in English, it would not have been a very effective exercise.

¹ Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*. Trans. Jay Rubin. London: Harvill, 2000. First published as *Noruwei no mori*. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1987. p. 232.

But as a nation we have a problem putting into practice the idea that a healthy society needs viable education and research across the board. The problem is not one of acceptance of the idea – there may be some who argue for a purely instrumentalist education agenda, but most of us recognise that as a notion that belongs in the realm of anti-human dystopia. The problem is partly to do with the size of the pie, and the seldom enunciated but deeply held view that the Humanities are, now that the chips are down, a very nice thing that can be lived without. But to a significant extent the problem is to do not with the presence of any particular idea about what the Humanities are, what their scholars do, and how these activities relate to society at large – instead, it is to do with an absence, at the crucial stages, of much thought at all about the Humanities.

1. The trouble with the Humanities

Allow me to quote another literary work, Dr Kemp's Research White Paper of Christmas 1999. One of the aims of the *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms, he stated, was the introduction of

performance-based funding for research student places and research activity in universities, with allocative formulae and transitional arrangements designed to ensure that all universities are able to compete effectively under the new arrangements.²

Whatever the merits at the institutional level of the changes implemented from 2000, it became apparent that not all disciplines or discipline clusters have been able to compete effectively, and some have been significantly disadvantaged by the unintended consequences of these reforms. The Humanities disciplines have suffered particularly, due to various knock-on, iterative and proxy effects of the several funding formulae.

Material disincentives discouraged institutions from extending or even maintaining investment in their Humanities research strengths; Humanities departments were deprived of the resources necessary to achieve their performance targets; and the relative economy of Humanities teaching and research activity became, perversely, a distinct liability in the struggle to survive, let alone to thrive.

The system was designed to make institutions compete with each other, and this design found expression within institutions as fortunes divided over disciplinary lines. Despite statements to the effect that national formulae were not intended to be applied internally, these pressures were reproduced internally, at the faculty and departmental level, across the country. It is difficult to see how institutions could fail to apply some version of these relativities to their internal research profiles, especially once others had identified competitive advantage in doing so.

² Dr D.A. Kemp, *Knowledge and Innovation: A policy statement on research and research training*, December 1999. p. 4.

Just as the system magnifies inter-institutional relative benefits over time as patterns become reinscribed and disparities emphasised, the effect of the internal application of national formulae for resource-allocation is to entrench any downward spiral. When both the starting position and the steepness of the descent are influenced by factors entirely unrelated to objective research performance or the actual health of the research enterprise – factors to do with belonging to a discipline that is structurally disadvantaged, in part because it does not place as much of a load on the taxpayer – then the unintended result for the Australian research enterprise is plainly damaging.

The structural disadvantages in the *Knowledge and Innovation* system for the Humanities are so dramatic that one regression analysis estimated that even a Humanities Faculty that was able to capture and concentrate *all* of the Humanities research funding in Australia would still be unable to get ahead, such are the disparities in the system. The Humanities disciplines are unable to improve their research-driven allocation even if they improve their research performance in the areas in which they can compete. At best the Humanities could hold their own, but only if no other discipline or department in the national research system improved its lot. However, since the Humanities are structurally unable to improve at a rate equal to those privileged by funding ratios of 2.35:1 for students, access to competitive funding in nominated Priority Areas, rewards for the conduct of high-cost research, and so on, the inevitable result in a closed-loop competitive system is a rapid decline in fortunes for the Humanities.

Despite their popularity with students – that is to say, the market – teaching activity in the Humanities does not have a happier time of it than research. It is our concern that the central planning model of discipline-specific load funding entailed in the proposed Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) will erode the capacity of universities to offer instruction in vital disciplines to levels sought by students and demanded by our national interest. As I have outlined, the Humanities have been overlooked in funding formulae for some time, and it is a fear – born of extensive experience – that the agreements on ‘appropriate’ discipline mix will further erode the capacity of Humanities departments to make their contributions (despite student demand). Such an outcome would further entrench the marginalisation of the human sciences in Australia’s teaching and research activities that is already conspicuous in the research context. Furthermore the penalties that will apply, should universities decide to meet demand and enrol students beyond the small tolerance permitted beyond the mandated discipline mix, ensure that this measure restricts rather than encourages diversity, flexibility and responsiveness to community needs.

Despite constituting a much larger actual proportion of the academic population in Australia, the Humanities are funded as only one of twelve discipline clusters under the proposed CGS. The estimated Commonwealth course contribution for the Humanities (at \$4180 per EFTSU)³ is just over half of the average across the system (of \$8113)⁴. While

³ Table A: ‘Commonwealth Course Contribution Schedule 2005’, *Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future*. Canberra, DEST 2003. p. 13.

our disciplines are often less expensive to teach and to conduct research in, this model risks introducing a financial incentive to institutions to focus their teaching efforts on other discipline clusters. Without the use of specific incentives to the contrary, this may contribute to further erosion of the number of Humanities places.⁵

So why is this happening? To my mind, none of it is because anybody wants to put the Humanities out of business. I see these as side-effects – albeit serious ones – of measures built to produce other outcomes. But how does a system this elaborate get built without these side-effects being identified and designed out? If it is partly due to a failure of imagination, there is a prior fundamental cause of a narrowness of policy input. Without enquiring seriously into what Humanities research is done in Australia, under what conditions it is done, and to what effect, we do not even appear on the strategic radar. Without people at the table with an experience of what can be contributed from the human disciplines, there is simply not an informed awareness of the full range of options available to policy-makers. It is like forgetting the designers and the ergonomic experts when making a car: sure, what you build will run, but it will be ugly and will not fit actual people very well. No one will buy it, and no one will drive it. You need these people in on the project from the start so that expensive mistakes are avoided and so that the product fulfils its purpose.

2. The importance of the Humanities

The recent Review of Closer Collaboration between Universities and Major Publicly Funded Research Agencies was revealing on this point. The Review focussed pretty well exclusively upon science and technology research, although its terms of reference directed the Committee to develop “policies for enhanced collaboration,” and explicitly recognised the need to exploit research breadth across disciplines in order “to stay at the forefront of knowledge creation and address increasingly complex economic, technological and social needs.” In practice there is so far little evidence of any serious intention to utilise Humanities research activity in the work of these PFRAs. It is clear that a great deal of further policy work needs to be done to explicitly embrace such opportunities, rather than just hoping that some may sneak in on the coat-tails of existing structures, which are not especially effective at bringing in researchers from across the disciplinary divide.

The various research reviews have been conducted this year in the context of the existing National Research Priorities, and the outcomes – which will guide research policy at the highest level for the next several years – will be made in their image. This is a great pity, as these Priorities, as they stand, are overly narrow in their grasp of Australia’s total available research effort, and therefore fail to maximise their own stated goals of effectiveness and efficiency. All of the areas of enquiry outlined by the four National

⁴ The estimated Commonwealth course contribution averaged between the discipline clusters. This is not weighted for estimated enrolments.

⁵ Just as the relative inexpensiveness of research projects in the Humanities leads to the under-valuing of their conduct in a funding regime focussed on grant-dollar acquisition.

Research Priorities have a significant human component in terms of both causation and solution, as we have argued at length throughout the priority-setting process.⁶ The Academy of the Humanities has been working with the Government on the enhancement of the National Research Priorities during the year, and it is likely that the outcomes of this process will be announced fairly shortly. It is hoped that these enhancements will open up the parameters of research design so that truly innovative research project architecture can be implemented.

The problem is that the conduct of the present Reviews with reference strictly to the first generation Priorities, without sufficiently taking into account the useful contribution to be made by the humanities and social sciences, will inevitably impoverish their respective outcomes. Without considering the contribution that is and can be made by the Humanities and Social Sciences, *any* survey of any aspect of Australia's research enterprise will only be able to unlock less than half of our research potential (less than half because of the lost opportunity for collaborative work). Because the need can arise suddenly, there is no way to know until it is too late what cost we may have to pay for getting this only half right. Without urgent rejuvenation, we are on the brink of losing research capacity altogether in areas that we may need to call on at any time.

Two events of the last couple of years have presented as threats that transcend national boundaries in new ways, and have adjusted the playing surface upon which nations relate to each other as well as to their own populations. I am speaking about the rapid global spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and the resurgence in international Terrorist activity, marked most prominently by the destruction of the World Trade Centre and the use of four passenger aircraft as missiles. The twinning of these two phenomena was featured just last week at the release of the Australian Government's Tourism White Paper, where the impact upon inbound tourism of these factors was highlighted.

You might think that I am going to talk about the fact that the prominence of these global concerns in talk about tourism activity constitutes a case study revealing the human and social components at play – the fact that these events have to some extent undermined public confidence in moving about the world. While there are legitimate social, economic and political questions that need to be addressed intelligently and expertly along these lines, I am not going down that road. Instead, I want to look at a deeper level to the differences in strategic approach to these two global problems and consider the net effectiveness of the respective campaigns. What is revealed provokes thought on the question of how we regard, harness and support research and teaching in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

As with AIDS two decades earlier, much fairly detailed discussion took place in the public domain about the global effort to combat SARS. To my knowledge, nobody argued that the SARS effort should be directed exclusively at detection and treatment of

⁶ Refer to the publication *The Humanities and Australia's National Research Priorities* for a detailed discussion of this issue. Available at www.humanities.org.au/policy/priorities/humanitiesrpreportfinal.pdf

the disease. To all our minds it went without saying that, while these components of the strategy were and are crucial, significant resources and effort had to be focussed also on the struggle to understand the origins and modes of transmission of the disease. It seemed obvious that SARS was an infectious disease, but this needed to be confirmed. Was it a virus, a bacterium, or some other pathogen? How did it move from one person to another? Is it transmitted directly or is there a vector? What are the environmental elements that favour its incubation and transmission? From where did it arise? Is it an endogenously human bug or did it 'cross-over' from an animal reservoir? How entrenched is it in its home population? What is its genetic make-up? What are its variants? What are its chemical and environmental vulnerabilities? How do we stop the thing getting a hold on a human population? What factors render a population more vulnerable? Clearly an intelligent strategy with any hope of success has to recognise that it is not just about detection, quarantine, and treatment, as important as those elements of the fight are. It is also about containment, prevention and, we hope, eradication. These latter elements can be achieved only through an understanding of the origins, structure, mechanics and conditions of development of the disease.

To date, Terrorism has not been approached with nearly as much focus on the elemental considerations, which are key to the long term success of any strategy of containment, prevention and eradication of terroristic behaviour. It could be argued that the response to terrorism has so far been chiefly focussed upon the tactical questions of detection, quarantine and 'treatment'. As with SARS, these activities are crucial – it is necessary to survive the short term before long term strategies become relevant. But an intelligent strategic response will need to incorporate a significant focus on these more basic questions of the origins of terrorism – and soon – if we hope through understanding to reduce terrorism or even to eradicate it. And if some argue that eradication of terrorism is hopeless – that there will always be those who will engage in this activity no matter what we do – it does not mean we should not work towards that end, through trying to understand its conditions of production, reproduction and transmission. We have not found it necessary to abandon epidemiological research simply because no disease barring smallpox has been actually completely wiped out.

We need to conduct a concerted, well planned epidemiology of Terrorism, as part of a broader strategy of abatement, containment and eventual eradication of this behaviour. Who will do this work? Political scientists, historians, philosophers, linguists, development economists, scholars of culture, literature and religion. What questions will they ask? Let me adapt a few questions from the SARS research that raised no eyebrows before:

It seems obvious that Terrorism is a political, cultural and economic disease, but this needs to be confirmed. Is it socio-economic, religious, or a pathology of some other cultural aspect? How does it move from one person to another? Is it transmitted directly or is there a vector? What are the environmental elements that favour its incubation and transmission? From where did it arise? Is the bug endogenous to particular communities or does it 'cross-over' from reservoirs in other cultures and settings? How entrenched

is it in its current populations? What is its 'genetic' make-up? What are its variants? What are its cultural and environmental vulnerabilities? How do we stop the thing getting a hold on a population? What factors render a population more vulnerable?

As I remarked before about SARS,

Clearly an intelligent strategy with any hope of success has to recognise that it is not just about detection, quarantine, and treatment, as important as those elements of the fight are. It is also about containment, prevention and, we hope, eradication. These latter elements can be achieved only through an understanding of the origins, structure, mechanics and conditions of development of the disease.

Now some will say that the analogy between SARS and Terrorism doesn't hold beyond a certain point in terms of the work done on the more fundamental questions, since the study of the origins of SARS falls properly within the ambit of the biological sciences, whereas the point I am making about Terrorism is that its origins can only be understood and countered through the understanding of the cultural, political, economic and philosophical conditions that underpin it. Even the question of the transmission of SARS is to a significant extent a problem of medical science, although it is easy to see that social behaviour is a key factor here too. So if commentators argue that SARS and Terrorism are different in this way and that my analogy between them is imperfect, well, I would agree. But as a student of narrative, let me put it to you that it is precisely the extent to which these prongs of the analogy are incongruent that renders it instructive.

If the search for origins as a deeper means of combating a scourge seemed self-evident with respect to SARS, but has yet to take hold with respect to Terrorism, I submit that this is because the means of conducting such research in the latter case is within the realm of the human, and not the natural, sciences. The work is done on the wrong side of what I would call the Ivory Curtain, in disciplines that are at times not taken seriously enough by politicians, bureaucrats, business and the public. These disciplines are routinely referred to as the 'soft' disciplines – I trust it is not necessary for me to invoke Freud for us to realise what that terminology might reveal about the anxieties of those who use it. But there is no doubt that there exists a notion that 'hard' science leads to definite outcomes, that its methods are demonstrably sound, and that it can be trusted to do the work and build a technological solution to a problem, in this case SARS. 'Soft' disciplines such as the Humanities and to a lesser extent the Social Sciences are often regarded – when they are regarded at all – as suspect, obscure and subjective, with fuzzy methodologies and outcomes with wide tolerances of applicability. This is a pretty wrong idea about what happens in both the Sciences and the Humanities, but the result is a dangerous ignorance about the kinds of activity that we need to support if we are to find a solution to this urgent problem.

3. Bringing the Humanities to the table

The Humanities are without doubt central to any strategy that amounts to more than a spinal reflex. Yet since hard approaches have little to offer this time beyond the level of the tactical, that is, by and large, where our response has stalled. It is true that the Humanities are not able to give absolute answers in definitive unqualified statements of fact; the questions do not lend themselves to precise mapping. But avoiding the questions because we find them too messy is not going to solve anything either. The application of our methods and understandings to the problem will still result in a vastly greater apprehension of the causes of Terrorism than we can hope to achieve without involving all of those who have talent and expertise to offer.

I am not trying to put an argument on the question so much as to demonstrate how far our thinking on Terrorism is from the whole-of-problem strategic approach that characterises the work on SARS. The same structural blindness is true of our other national priorities, both those enunciated in the four Research Priorities and our other matters of national interest. Within this, we need to develop and maintain the capacity to respond quickly to both problems and opportunities that are not yet apparent. Terrorism again provides an example: even while our degraded Asian capacity is attracting belated attention, our Russian capacity is continuing to decline. Who can say that this scant capacity is adequate when nuclear weapons are floating around in such a politically turbulent part of the world? And if we wish to rebuild our capacity in Russian language, culture and economy, what does it matter that our people come to acquire this competence by way of a love of literature, fine art or culture? It is all the same in the end. But a widespread refusal to take these pursuits seriously is having a dire impact on our ability to seize opportunities and respond to problems.

Conclusion

My message today really boils down to three points:

1. The Humanities are in trouble; yet
2. We are needed to pursue the best future for the nation; and
3. The solution is to bring us to the table.

Any effective whole-of-government approach to the big questions of our knowledge of the world – and particularly of our corner of it – needs to feature a set of targeted initiatives to promote the viability of the Humanities in our universities. Put simply, the nation's economic and social objectives cannot be achieved without us. These disciplines are not a luxury to be indulged in plenty and excised in lean times – they are integral to the operation of an affluent, stable and mature society. They constitute a vibrant existing resource that is at present vastly under-utilised in the national research and higher education effort.

Despite this, they are a fading resource for the reasons outlined. Furthermore there is a long lead-time in the re-establishment of capacity in these fields, and the benign neglect of strategically vital capacities in these uncertain times is hard to fathom. It is even more

improvident given that the Humanities are also substantially cheaper to run than the Sciences.

Recent policy consultations have paid much more attention to the Humanities and Social Sciences than has been paid in the past, and we welcome this development as appropriate and necessary. We also understand that there are proposals in the pipeline designed to offset the detrimental impact upon the Humanities of current funding structures, and we look forward to the opportunity to contribute to their development.

But we are still by and large being asked to participate as an adjunct to the main game, and often only after the chief decisions have been made. To be fully utilised, the disciplines of fully half of our education and research sector need to be more thoroughly integrated into the policy formulation process. Among other things, the Humanities and Social Sciences need a seat at the big table from the outset. There is no way to tell how many opportunities will be missed otherwise, nor how high the price may be if we are not there when the next crisis hits.