

Art education: a social good or corporate thorn?

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Biographies

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Abstract

Education is a social good, a necessity for the betterment of peoples and societies. There is simply no refuting that by any other logic than the most sexist, classist or racist social conservatism. However the corporate model of universities is failing us: the market does not know best. The neo-liberal accounting that has infected universities—as it has all other sectors of society—supports ongoing financial reductions and reductionist thinking about art and education. These are political choices and they are neither inevitable nor particularly logical—despite the rhetoric to the contrary. This merely leads us to the financial value and dividends of art and the measurement of impact in creative research. However, the impact of creative work on society and culture is not merely quantifiable. As our institutions swing further to the market fundamentalist orthodoxy of our moment artists—as usual—are responding creatively. Free schools have sprung up across the world in response to these conditions and their negative impacts upon the study and evolution of arts practice. In the spirit of the artist's polemic, this paper will examine emergent models for real world and virtual solutions that offer potential for art and education: post capitalism.

Keywords: art, education, share, economy, alternatives.

Art education: a social good or corporate thorn?

Education is a social good, a necessity for the betterment of peoples and societies. Education builds capacity and enables creativity, knowledge, opportunity, resilience, criticality, invention, social relations and productive economies. However, the contemporary university marketplace is failing us: the market does not know best. The neo-liberal accounting that has infected universities supports ongoing financial reductions and reductionist thinking about art and education. The corporate model of Australian universities devalues education as a right and public asset by viewing students as consumers and university programs as products. These are political choices, which are values and operations that have so insidiously wound themselves into the public imagination that we have stopped questioning them. This paper reveals some cracks in the system and the potential for new modes of funding and facilitating art and interdisciplinary education.

The need for academics to cut back, tighten our belts, and do more with less means there is constant pressure for our students to use ageing, and annually diminished, resources and be taught by a workforce whose median age is increasing every year. Inside this is a value: austerity. In economic terms this means spending is cut as taxes are increased to reduce debt. Austerity has been discredited as a means of strengthening economies by no less august an authority than the International Monetary Fund. In its 2012 World Economic Outlook, the IMF's then chief economist, Olivier Blanchard found that their growth projections for economies enacting austerity measures had been grossly overestimated (Blanchard and Leigh 2012, 8). Further to this, Blanchard's analysis showed that economies that had continued to pursue stimulus spending, reinvesting in their economies, had actually been improving better through the period post 2008 than those who had pursued austerity measures (Plumer 2012). For these countries, the damage being done to their economic growth was outweighing the value of debt reduction (Plumer 2012).

This example demonstrates how austerity is overrated as an essential response to our transitioning and sluggish western economies. Austerity has inside it another value—all debt is bad. Australian political debate, as concerns the economy, has been so completely debt obsessed since 2008 that one could be forgiven for thinking that the Sydney Opera House was about to be repossessed. All economies manage debt. However, the debate is about the level of debt an economy has which is typically expressed as a percentage of its gross domestic product or (how much an

economy generates divided by how much it owes expressed as percentage). Australia has a debt to GDP ratio of 18.3% and whilst it is historically high for Australia, it is very low by international standards (Tsikas 2016). We can afford to do more in the public sector, we choose not to. We should never make the mistake of believing the status quo is the only answer and buy into the rhetoric of 'hard economic facts'. Indeed, there are few economic facts, rather there are theories and choices.

Since the late 1980s, Australian Federal Governments (Labor and Coalition) have argued that the state cannot afford to take full responsibility for the funding of higher education. After originally scrapping tuition fees and introducing free education for higher education in 1974 (Whitlam Institute 2015), through Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's reformist but short lived Labor Federal Government, Whitlam's own party introduced a user pays system in 1989 when Education Minister John Dawkins reviewed Australian universities and colleges and initiated the introduction of tuition fees for all Australian higher education students (Australian Government Department of Education and Training 2015).

Australian university students currently pay upfront fees or deferred through their taxes from latter earnings for invoices accrued for their tertiary education. In 2016, creative art undergraduates will contribute \$6246 to their Commonwealth supported places if they are an Australian resident or citizen or a New Zealand citizen (Australian Government Taxation Office 2016). This fee is reduced by 10% if they pay up front, which gives a financial imperative and advantage to those who can afford to pay at the point of entry. Currently graduates pay off their contribution through the taxation system once they earn \$54,869 or higher. In the interim debts accumulate interest annually based on the Consumer Price Index.

There is little discussion (if any) in Australia about the possibility of reforming higher education by reviewing the impact of fees on universities. And why not? There is actually no reason why the state cannot pay for our nation's higher education when extraordinarily high budgets are given to the maintenance of other Australian national priorities. As an interesting comparison, in the 2015-2016 financial year, almost \$1.1 billion was provided for the operation of Australian offshore detention centres for asylum seekers (Parliament of Australia 2016) and in the same financial year the defence force received "\$31.9 billion plus \$132.6 billion over the Forward Estimates" (Australian Government Department of Defence 2015). Whilst this is a simple

robbing of Major Peter to pay Professor Paul, one could drill further into the economic priorities of government to examine priorities and values in different ways. To take a topical example, our current government wishes to increase the cost of education — proposed 20% cut to CGS places and the, as yet to be ruled out, deregulation of university fees (Australian Government, Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education 2016, 17) — whilst simultaneously reducing business tax rates.

The idea behind the business tax cut is based on supply side (colloquially trickle down economics). In this particular incarnation if we invest in business by relieving it of high tax rates then economic growth will flow through investment in jobs and productivity—and ultimately generate greater tax revenues (Harper 2016). That is, instead of a few large tax contributions there will many smaller tax contributions because of all the activity and jobs generated by the freedom of capital to invest the money it saves on its tax bill.

There are three key problems with this idea. First, this economic ideology does not lead directly to higher incomes (with the exception of business owners) nor does it increase productivity per capita — luring businesses from other higher taxing jurisdictions does not make individuals more productive. Secondly, it may create more jobs but they will not necessarily be well paid (high skill) jobs. Finally, there is no guarantee that businesses will reinvest profits in Australia, or in new jobs, or even in their business. They might just buy a new car or pay their kid's university fees.

The surest means of ensuring the growth of per capita productivity is a well educated workforce. Let's take two studies by organisations that are ideologically agnostic or pro-business. A 2013 study by the American Economic Policy Institute on productivity draws clear and uniform relationships between education and wages (Berger and Fisher 2013). Wages are not the same as productivity obviously, but they are considered a key measure because they indicate the value an employee contributes to overall revenue. Berger and Fisher also offer a clear critique of the trickle down tax cut theory: 'Cutting taxes to capture private investment from other states is a race-to-the-bottom state economic development strategy that undermines the ability to invest in education'—conditions for workers are continually traded off against more attractive conditions for business (Berger and Fisher).

The Asian Development Bank also draws this conclusion from a comprehensive study of economies in south Asia:

The data for both developed and developing economies support this argument. No country grew quickly without the benefit of a highly qualified labor force. In Asia, all those that grew quickly possessed a workforce that was exceptionally well qualified (Kim and Terada-Hagiwara 2012, 22).

At a time when we are told we can no longer afford universal healthcare, or arrest the deterioration of our education system, to take such a gamble on a theory that has been tried, analysed, and found wanting is offensive to common sense.

There are numerous countries throughout the world that do not charge tuition fees for higher education. Just last year, 2015, Germany removed fees to make higher education free. The UK is similar to Australia and the US in the sense of offering good student services but with high tuition fees (Australian Federal Government Department of Education and Training, Higher Education in Australia: A review of reviews from Dawkins to today 2016, 34). UK students pay fees through a system similar to their Australian counterparts (introduced in 2008), with fees varying up to the maximum level of £9000 for English and EU nationals, whereas non-EU international students pay between £10,000-30,000 (The Complete University Guide 2016).

There is a great diversity in fee structures in the European Union where, university education on the whole is either free for EU nationals, (Norway, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden), or relatively cheap in France and Spain. Some EU countries charge fees for programs taught in a language other than the state official languages (Czech Republic, Finland and Poland), and some countries charge fees for specialist universities (Austria: applied sciences). Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal and The Netherlands charge tuition fees for EU and non-EU students. For students from countries outside the EU, the scale of tuition fees varies. Universities are free for non-EU students in Norway, Iceland, Luxembourg, Slovenia. However, Austria, Belgium, Greece and Hungary charge relatively low tuition fees, whereas Denmark, Sweden, Latvia, Poland, Switzerland charge non-EU students higher fees (Study in Europe 2016).

This summary indicates that there are many ways to fund higher education. It is not that some countries have unsustainable systems whilst we have the fairest, most sustainable and most effective (in economic terms). We refuse to accept that Australia needs to continually cut university budgets or that we cannot fully fund student places. We argue that the acceptance of ever higher tuition fees is actually unacceptable. It is vitally important that we engage in new and different conversations about Australian university funding and student tuition fees to inform a national debate. Otherwise, the eventual deregulation of the Australian university sector will be viewed as inevitable.

Sustained cuts to higher education have coincided with the corporatisation of university administrations, which seek high gross margins from schools to ensure smooth operating budgets. This puts enormous pressure on schools (including art schools) to bring in external income from fee-paying students and other income generation schemes. The corporatisation of universities is particularly problematic for art schools. We are resource intensive and relatively uncompetitive in bringing in research income. Unpacking this a little in terms of expense: in many instances we provide students with an individual work space; we have fabrication facilities across a range of media; we continue to insist upon the 1:1 tutorial as a critical element of studio art education; our group teaching is often at low ratios (with the exception of history and theory courses). Whilst on the external funding side: the arts education sector's industrial links are similarly cash strapped cultural enterprises and we are relatively uncompetitive in obtaining research funding.

The explanation for our pedagogical method is largely premised upon the fact that we do not recognise an orthodoxy in practice: there is no single or right way to be a contemporary artist. For good or ill the currency of art, as practiced since modernism, is innovation. We must go to the individual's practice because history has shown us that every time we settle on an orthodoxy we are usurped by subsequent innovations. Art education today is the facilitation of critical creativity. Creativity means to create something new, something as yet unconsidered. Criticality means that every assumption, every history, is questioned. These factors in combination mean we need to deal with the particularities of each individual practice ... and that's expensive.

As a result, art schools provide small gross margins to the central university. This can be an impediment to Universities, who are beholden to schools and departments

that contribute higher financial contributions. Art schools are also not free from having to prove their financial viability, excellence, impact and engagement with external stakeholders within their university cultures and through government audits and ranking exercises. Efficiency and the careful accounting of public monies are important values but we often cannot make meaningful comparisons between different types of schools and academic traditions. This system has pitted faculties against each other and constantly puts art in an embattled position.

The charging of substantial tuition fees by Australian, English and American universities links education (or knowledge production) to the neoliberal market place where housing, education and health are individual commodities rather than state investments and responsibilities of a civil society. However, artists—as usual—are responding creatively.

In recent years, free art schools and university like organisations have emerged in the United States and the England to provide alternative educational offerings to the high fee programs offered by US and the UK universities and colleges. This is because communities of practitioners and educators recognise and cater for people who cannot afford tuition fees, or refuse to pay them on principle. There are also many asylum seekers and refugees that cannot enter higher education because they do not have permanent visas or residency in the countries they are seeking asylum, and are precluded from higher educational opportunities. Fortunately, there are some free alternative education frameworks for people who cannot enter formal higher education as a result of their residency or financial situations.

The Silent University commenced in 2012 and engages in lectures, research and publications for and by refugees and asylum seekers in England, Jordan, Germany and Sweden. It has been supported by UK, Swedish and German organisations including the Delfina Foundation and the Tate since it was initiated (The Silent University 2015). Lecturers teach across the humanities, law, psychology, business, visual art and health, and whilst students cannot receive a formal degree, they can access specialist courses. However, the Silent University is also a radical exercise in pedagogy and advocacy. It provides courses for people that are excluded from formal social systems and power by people who have also been silenced by their lack of access and participation in education. The Silent University's supports 'a transversal pedagogy' (The Silent University 2015) around participation and creative commons where everyone has the right to be educated (The Silent University 2015).

Like The Silent University, The Public School is an international undertaking where classes are given across a broad and imaginative spectrum of ideas and practices in cities in the US, Europe, the UK and Brazil. It has classes, but no set curriculum, which means that people can take and offer classes with no synergetic or disciplinary threads. Learning takes place as people collectively respond to ideas, actions and concepts. For this reason, it could be described as a slow education movement. Like the Silent University, The Public School is clear in its opposition to corporatised education which ‘...neglects the things that can only be figured out by going slowly into and out of an idea, an action or practice, or a whim, without a profitable result in mind’ (The Public School 2016).

Whilst the Silent University and The Public School offer courses and classes in numerous subjects including art, there are also alternatives to traditional postgraduate fine art programs offered by free art schools located in London. These art schools have emerged due to the expense of formal universities post-graduate coursework programs and as a vehicle for graduate art students to engage in collective practices. The Islington Mill Art Academy and The School of the Damned have been established by London artists as counterpoints to the more established programs provided by London’s art schools and universities. As the Islington Mill Art Academy website explains:

Within IMAA there is no differentiation between professor and pupil, and there are no set courses, but rather a shared propensity to learn and to strive for understanding (Islington Mill Art Academy 2016).

The ethos of IMAA revolves around the development of a community of practice with open ‘crit’ sessions held for members and visiting artists where students discuss and unpack their work in group tutorials, events and through an online blog. The more radical School of the Damned is run through a venue above a tavern in East London. The School is a free postgraduate art course which provides a framework of criticality for its artists. Students spend a year developing, reflecting and assessing their art practice and complete with a group exhibition; this framework clearly emulating university MFA programs. Furthermore, the School ‘exists to promote access to free education as a fundamental right and stand in opposition to the current system of higher education’ (School of the Damned 2016).

Like the School of the Damned, we question the choices Governments make when they choose not to fully fund higher education. We believe that Australian universities should receive appropriate funds from the State to ensure that they thrive educationally and financially, and so that they do not have to charge student tuition fees. As soon as Universities receive the appropriate state funds required to maintain their institutions, we can move from austere corporate models to organisations which nurture and extend the education and research we need to undertake through the 21st Century.

However, by continuing to subscribe to the marketplace as the only model to base higher education, we are missing the opportunity to review the way that universities operate and could operate into this century. The alternative university models discussed in this paper provide clues to where our traditional and corporatised universities need to pay attention and invest their pedagogies and research.

We encourage readers to draw links between how we currently teach, learn and research in university art schools, how our universities are funded and how they operate financially in local, national and international marketplaces. We need to question whether this is creative, innovative and sustainable at a human level, much less financially.

Whether one accepts our proposals for alternatives or not, the critical message is that funding cuts to university budgets and the charging of tertiary fees are choices, not economic realities, facts, or inevitabilities. We therefore encourage further local and national research, debate and discussions into new models for funding and delivering higher education in Australia, and demand full investments by Australian governments in our higher education sector and the end to the user pays system. Otherwise we may ultimately see the complete deregulation of Universities and the erosion of a creative, sustainable and knowledge based higher education sector and economy.

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