

**Exploring Difference: The Philosophy of Undergraduate Education**  
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**The Melbourne Model**

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**1. Introduction**

In 2008, the University of Melbourne embarked upon the most radical transformation of its academic programs in its history of 155 years. [1] The University introduced six “New Generation” undergraduate degrees – Arts, Biomedicine, Commerce, Environments, Music and Science. In time, these degrees will replace the 100 (or so) undergraduate programs previously available at the University. Together with this contraction in undergraduate programs, the University began to move professional education to the graduate level, with the introduction of new graduate programs in Law, Architecture, Nursing and Teaching; these will be followed, in due course, by graduate programs in Medicine and Engineering (among others). The third tier in the structure is provided by the PhD, the principal vehicle for research training at the doctoral level.

The “Melbourne Model” is influenced by aspects of the Bologna Process (particularly its 3+2+3 structure), by North American experience in the sequential provision of liberal and professional education, and by recent developments in higher education in the Asian region. Nevertheless, the Melbourne Model is distinctive in many respects.

The duration of the “New Generation” undergraduate degrees is three years, in conformity with Bologna rather than the USA and Canada.

Each of these degrees has its disciplinary core, and students are required to gain proficiency in that discipline. In addition, however, students must take at least 25% of their subjects outside their core discipline, thereby achieving a breadth of knowledge across the humanities, sciences and social sciences.

The duration of graduate professional programs may well be two years (Architecture, Nursing, Teaching) but may also be three (Law) or four (Medicine) as required to meet professional accreditation standards. In this regard the Melbourne Model appears to part company with the Bologna Process.

## 2. Context

The decision to adopt the Melbourne Model was taken in the context of significant developments in the Australian higher education sector. At the same time, it should be noted that this decision was made unilaterally by the University of Melbourne, devoid of influence by federal or state governments. While the University of Melbourne is a public institution, established under state legislation and in receipt of substantial federal funding, it retains a measure of institutional autonomy sufficient to allow this decision to embark alone upon this academic adventure.

One significant development was the evolution, over a period of more than three decades, of double (undergraduate) degree programs. Often, these double degree programs combine a liberal degree (Arts, Commerce, Science) with a professional degree (Engineering, Law, Medicine). Both degrees are undergraduate. They are taken concurrently. Students obtain credit for a limited number of subjects towards both degrees, thereby reducing the duration of double degree programs (in comparison with the time required to complete the two degrees sequentially). For example, a typical BA/LLB program, involving the award of both degrees, takes five years rather than the six required to obtain a BA followed by an LLB.

It seems that this development was largely, if not entirely, driven by student demand. For various reasons, students seeking professional qualifications chose to broaden their university education by enrolling in double degree programs. In 2007, only 5% of undergraduate LLB students at Melbourne were enrolled in the “straight” LLB course in preference to one of the double degree programs (BA/LLB, BComm/LLB, BSc/LLB, BMus/LLB, BCrArts/LLB, BCompSc/LLB).

A second significant development, which occurred over the last two decades, was a dramatic shift from public to private funding of tertiary education in Australia. Professor Simon Marginson notes that, while this shift was apparent across most of the OECD, it was greater in Australia than elsewhere. While private funding of tertiary education increased in many countries, in most cases that increase was accompanied by an increase in public funding. Not so in Australia. Between 1995 and 2004, total public funding of tertiary education in Australia fell by 4% in real terms, and public funding per student fell by 27%. [2] That drop was offset by a sharp increase in private funding, largely from student tuition fees. As a result, between 1995 and 2004 the proportion of funding for tertiary education that came from private sources in Australia increased from 35.2% to 52.8%, the largest such shift in the OECD. [3]

A third development, linked closely to the second, was the substantial increase in the number of foreign tertiary students in Australia. By 2003, 18.7% of Australian tertiary students were from overseas, the highest proportion in the OECD; the figure for the United Kingdom was 11.3%, and that for the USA was 3.5%. [4] No fewer than 13 Australian universities now have over 8,000 international students, whereas the University of Southern California, with under 7,000 international students, has the largest foreign enrolment of any American doctoral university. [5]

This development has impinged upon the budgets of almost all Australian universities. In addition, it has had a substantial effect upon the Australian economy. Education recently replaced tourism as Australia's biggest services export. In 2007, the revenue generated by foreign students in Australia increased by 21% to A\$12.5 billion; in terms of export revenue, education is now ranks third overall, behind coal (A\$20.8 billion) and iron ore (A\$16). [6]

The increase in foreign students has also demonstrated unequivocally that in recent years Australia has become a participant in, rather than a mere observer of, the globalization of tertiary education. Globalization brings competition, and competition stimulates innovation. Professor James Wilkinson, Director of the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University, made this point in forthright fashion during a visit in 2006 to the University of Melbourne:

“I don't think Australian higher education has any choice but to diversify and innovate now. There's a long lead time in education. It is not smart just to think that what worked well in the past might work well in the future.” [7]

### **3. Rationale**

Professor Richard James notes that the three fundamental measures of the effectiveness of a higher education system are quality, equity and efficiency. [8] These measures also provide useful benchmarks for appraisal of the Melbourne Model.

The Melbourne Model seeks to enhance the quality of undergraduate education in various ways. In the first place, it alleviates the time constraints that double degree programs impose upon liberal degrees in Australia. The dual credit arrangements that underpin double degree programs reduce the time spent by students upon their non-professional discipline to two years, at the most. The “extra” year allocated to the “New Generation” undergraduate degrees allows greater depth of inquiry in a chosen field (especially through participation in research in that field), while encouraging breadth of knowledge by requiring students to take at least 25% of their subjects outside their core disciplines. It also facilitates international exchanges and experiential learning projects.

Secondly, the Melbourne Model sets out to restore the status of liberal degrees from the subordinate position which many students assume that they occupy in double degree programs, to that of full equality with professional degrees. In double degree programs, the fact that students undertake two degrees concurrently makes competition between the demands of those degrees likely, if not inevitable. In that competition, the professional degree usually prevails, perhaps because it offers career prospects which are less evident in the liberal degree.

Thirdly, the Melbourne Model allows renewed emphasis upon coherence and cohort in undergraduate education. Double degree programs, by presenting students with a

vast array of choices, promote fragmentation in the curriculum of liberal degrees and diminish the scope for group learning.

The value of coherence was espoused by Sir Alec Broers, in an address to the Royal Institution in 2005:

“Many of our undergraduate courses have become too narrow and over-specialized, and do not equip the young with flexible intellects that will be able to adapt to changing circumstances. An undergraduate degree should cover the fundamentals of a coherent range of subjects.” [9]

Moreover, undergraduate education should provide students with a broad base in preparation for diverse careers or entry into graduate schools offering professional education. [10]

Coherence and cohort are linked closely with pedagogy. Professor Wilkinson, in his 2006 Menzies Oration on Higher Education entitled “Undergraduate Education: What Good is it? An International Perspective”, argued that content (“what”) and pedagogy (“how”) are intimately related:

“What we are teaching as at bottom not so much content as a process of inquiry, not French history or invertebrate biology or the poetry of William Butler Yeats, but ways of asking questions and exploring hypotheses and coming to conclusions. These things cannot be taught in the absence of content, yet they are the skills that students will bring to an advanced degree or to careers in business and industry, much as medieval students brought skills in grammar and rhetoric and logic to the study of law, medicine, and theology.” [11]

Again, a sequential approach to learning is preferred in developing “the ability to ask good questions and to work at seeking answers based on evidence.”[12]

Equity demands access to tertiary education according to ability rather than means. It is justified by notions of social justice, especially in public institutions, but also by pragmatism. Universities are heavily dependent upon the intellectual calibre of their students, initially for peer learning obtained from cohort activities and experience, and subsequently from alumni achievements which shape institutional reputation.

The challenges to equity presented by the Melbourne Model are readily apparent: duration and cost. For students seeking professional qualifications, the Model adds a year to tertiary education, thereby increasing its cost.

The opportunities for equity presented by the Model are less obvious, but may well turn out to be more significant. The multi-tiered structure of the Model lends itself to a staged approach to equity, offering substantial advantages. Take the example of a high school student wishing to study law at Melbourne. Selection into the previous double degree programs was based largely (though not entirely) upon academic ranking derived from results in the Victorian Certificate of Education, or equivalent. High demand, together with a strictly limited number of places, produced astronomical entry levels: a ranking of 99.4 was required in 2007 to obtain a government subsidized (Commonwealth Supported) place, and a ranking of 98.0 was

required for a full-fee (Australian or International) place. The quality of a student's secondary education played a part in that ranking, and that quality was demonstrably uneven. In contrast, entry into the New Generation undergraduate degrees in 2008 was far less demanding, as the number of places in these programs was very much greater. A ranking of 85 was sufficient for a government subsidized place in Arts, Environments or Science, with somewhat higher ranking (about 95) required for Biomedicine and Commerce. Students entering these programs in 2008 now have three years to demonstrate their academic ability before (if they choose to do so) applying for selection into Law in 2011. At that time, they will be ranked according to tertiary academic results (not secondary), aptitude test scores and personal statements. It seems likely that able students from deprived social, economic and educational backgrounds, with the benefit of the three additional years and different selection criteria, will fare rather better in the competition for available places.

Efficiency in higher education is the subject of controversy. Nevertheless, the Melbourne Model may claim efficiency on two grounds. The first is that students, by deferring decisions on careers and professional qualifications for three years, will be able to make more informed and lasting choices, thereby improving completion rates in universities and retention rates in professions. The second is that, by close alignment of its courses with their counterparts in Asia, Europe and North America, the University of Melbourne will promote international student mobility and enhance international career prospects for its graduates.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Australia has chosen to embrace the globalization of tertiary education. One consequence of that decision is that Australian universities are now engaged in an international competition, where the rules of the market intrude upon the regulatory regimes which have governed universities for more than four decades. In the global market place, change is inevitable. [13]

Seen in that light, the Melbourne Model is hardly revolutionary. Nevertheless, its adoption was the result of a fundamental reappraisal of the University's core activities. Undergraduate education is one of those activities; others are graduate education, research and knowledge transfer (external engagement). All are related, one to another. Under the Melbourne Model, undergraduate education draws from and contributes to each of the others. Indeed, that close relationship is one of the defining attributes of the Model.

So far, the Model has enjoyed a favourable response in Australia, from governments, students, graduates and academic staff. Its impact in the international market place remains to be seen. Still, it sends a message to the world at large: Melbourne has come to play.

## 5. Footnotes

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## **Summary of the Australian workshop**

Professor Michael Crommelin from the University of Melbourne outlined the transformation of Melbourne's academic programs in the context of the topic "The Philosophy of Undergraduate Education" and international trends such as the Bologna Process.

In 2008 the University of Melbourne introduced six "New Generation" undergraduate degrees – Arts, Biomedicine, Commerce, Environments, Music and Science. In time, these degrees will replace around 100 undergraduate programs previously available.

Together with this contraction in undergraduate programs, the university began to move professional education to the graduate level, with the introduction of new graduate programs in Law, Architecture, Nursing and Teaching; these will be followed by graduate programs in Medicine and Engineering (among others).

The third tier in the structure is provided by the PhD, the principal vehicle for research training at the doctoral level.

The "Melbourne Model" is influenced by aspects of the Bologna Process (particularly its 3+2+3 structure), by North American experience in the sequential provision of liberal and professional education, and by recent developments in higher education in the Asian region. Nevertheless, the Melbourne Model is distinctive in many respects.

The duration of the "New Generation" undergraduate degrees is three years, in conformity with Bologna rather than the USA and Canada. However a fourth or Honours year is available for talented students who wish to pursue a pathway to a PhD or research career.

Each of these degrees has its disciplinary core, and students are required to gain proficiency in that discipline. In addition, however, students must take at least 25% of their subjects outside their core discipline, thereby achieving a breadth of knowledge across the humanities, sciences and social sciences.

The duration of graduate professional programs may be two years (Architecture, Nursing, Teaching) but may also be three (Law) or four (Medicine) as required to meet professional accreditation standards. In this regard the Melbourne Model appears to part company with the Bologna Process.

## **Issues/Lessons**

- The Melbourne Model can be seen as evidence of diversity within the Australian higher education system and potential for diversity within the Bologna Process structure in Europe. (Bologna does not mandate 3 year bachelor degrees).
- While some degrees will be shorter in length under the Melbourne Model, many will take longer to complete, especially at the postgraduate/professional level. Only time will tell if this Model is accepted by students in Australia and will rely heavily on Melbourne's international reputation for quality.

- Employer views were considered during the consultation phase for the Model, but so were the needs of today's students who are likely to change careers several times and therefore need broad knowledge and enduring skills.
- The Humboldt Principle of the link between research and teaching remains at the core of the Melbourne Model – all three year degrees can be extended to include a fourth Honours year for the preparation of a thesis and entry to doctorate programs.
- The Melbourne Model can be seen to increase equity of access to higher education. Previously students who wished to study law or medicine at undergraduate level required very high entry scores in their secondary school studies (eg 99% and above). The new generation broad degrees will require entry scores of 85% and above and will give students three years to prove their abilities at university level and time to consider their future career paths before they choose to specialise (or not) at postgraduate level.
- While the introduction of tuition fees in Australia 20 years ago has led to a higher education system where student demands are taken seriously, it has not led to a one size fits all system. Some students choose a three year Bachelor degree in order to move into the workforce as soon as possible (particularly in times of a strong economy and low unemployment as Australia is currently experiencing). However many students choose to return to postgraduate study after a period in the workforce or to gain postgraduate qualifications part-time while working. Others choose from a range of research focused undergraduate and postgraduate options available.