The Dangerous Road Ahead for Universities and the Teaching-Research Nexus

By:

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In this discussion, I want to highlight and briefly discuss why research and expertise has to become an even more important feature of teaching and learning initiatives. This might sound uncontroversial, but in the past two decades, significant funding for Australian universities has come from international students' fees. Arguably, the nexus between teaching and research during this time also shifted along with the availability of more funds for universities to invest in research as an important activity in and of itself. The university sector is potentially on a dangerous road if it does not establish a healthy approach to the teaching-research nexus.

In the past few months, discussions around teaching and learning initiatives and opportunities in universities in Australia have intensified as border closures have dramatically impacted the intake of foreign students. The debt already

accrued in 2020 from a drop in international student numbers ranges in the hundreds of millions for some universities. A recent report, now known as the Marshman analysis, identified universities that are at risk whilst seeking to weather what another commentator has referred to as a tsunami working its way through the higher education sector in Australia. Critically the Marshman report noted that the COVID-19 related financial challenges were not just issues for 2020, but could continue for a number of years even if borders open up between countries. Almost all universities in Australia have responded by either cutting back on existing or future jobs and/or entitlements, infrastructure investment, and so on.

Now, as if these challenges were not enough for the higher education sector, the Federal Government of Australia, which is a major funding source for universities, recently announced a shift in funding arrangements for students starting their studies in 2021. The announcement significantly increases the cost for students studying the arts, humanities, law and business, and reduces the cost for anyone studying science, engineering, nursing, and psychology. However, whilst to the public it seemed like the Federal Government of Australia was favouring the sciences, the actual Government funding to universities for these costlier courses was in fact being reduced in dollar terms, meaning that the universities would receive less per student as compared to those they enrolled in the arts and humanities. In fact, the various discussions about the funding models seemed to be irrelevant when the Government a few weeks later announced a $AUS 2 billion injection of funds into vocational education, known in Australia as the technical and further education (TAFE) sector. It seems that the Australian government is reducing its overall funding for the higher education sector to fund vocational training.

Given reduced funding to the higher education sector—both from COVID-19 related border closures and general government funding arrangements—universities have started focusing more attention on teaching and learning initiatives and packages. The impact of this move has so far been that there is less money to go around to support research; more of academic staff time is taken up transitioning courses to online delivery, and generally doing more teaching because there are less funds available for recruiting sessional and part-time teachers to help with tutorial classes and marking.

Further, most universities have also become busy planning for new courses to recruit similar numbers of students beyond 2020. In this environment, it would seem obvious for universities to rely on technically skilled teachers and technological expertise, like digital designers, to successfully help deliver materials online and ensure a competitive edge in the marketplace.

Universities and a challenging 2020

In a recent discussion paper, Vin Massaro made the point that some Australian universities should be allowed to exist only to teach students. This reflection came in the context of a review recently done for the Australian Government of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards where it was recommended that for an institution to be a university in Australia it must be doing world standard research in at least three broad fields where they provide educational facilities.[i] Massaro argues that given the arbitrary link between research and teaching there is no reason to require a university to do research. Research products in his view are already effectively used for teaching purposes, and good teaching can go beyond research strengths and capacities of a university. He also makes the point that in Australia, the teaching workforce is significantly casualised, without it having much impact on teaching quality.

While some of these points about the teaching-research nexus make sense in light of existing practices, they are too generalised to be relevant across all disciplines and areas of expertise. For instance, the selection of which cases to use in teaching international law is not always an uncritical and unreflective process (TRILA Report, p12). Knowing how to shape the way students think about a professional practise area like the law does not mean that the academic teacher is making neutral decisions when selecting the means to teach students about the subject. Even in science, while traditional research products like textbooks are standardised, the main experiences that students have in laboratories can be shaped not just by how sessions are organised but by how and what is discussed during them.

Australia’s experiences with universities highlight the opportunity that exists to further shape the role that research has always played in driving teaching and learning initiatives. Managers in universities do not always act in neutral ways

to research activities and can favour activities that engage with industry, go into outlets that help shape university rankings so as to attract international students, generates income from funding bodies, creates new and lucrative patents, and so on. Since 1986 in Australia, universities have been allowed to charge full fees for international students (Gamage, 1993), and arguably this led them to focus on research to improve international rankings, which would in turn increase overseas numbers. This strategy has traditionally incentivised research towards more commercial ends. This contrasts with research done for the purposes of writing textbooks, which in Australia has not counted towards the generalised assessment of research quality in universities. This means that the incentives to produce textbooks must be found elsewhere than in simple performance metrics for academic researchers.

To what extent then is the research-teaching nexus deeply and functionally entrenched in universities? How should we think about the benefits to the communities that rely on our universities, from deeper and incentivised teaching and research connections? I cannot answer these questions in this short discussion. However, beyond teaching knowledge and skills, the attitudes and values we promote through the choices we make about what we teach are deeply influenced by expertise, ethics, and research interests. The "Teaching and Researching International Law in Asia (TRILA) Project (2020)" report, which has inspired my thinking on this topic, sharply focuses one's attention on the role of expertise and research in its relation to international law teaching and learning initiatives and activities. By this, I am not referring to its discussion of research that is being done about pedagogy in Asia. It is more than that. It is doing research into and about the purpose and value of international law for Asia.

The report is replete with insightful views of how certain kinds of international law research need to be better used by academics to shape the contributions that legal education can make to a dynamic and sustainable Asia (TRILA Report, pp14-18). The report raises important questions about the value of expertise and research not just for creating products that others will use,[ii] but in realising that what we teach can influence the attitudes, values and dispositions of those whom we educate. Perhaps, this is more of a consideration in international law, which is infused with political, moral and culturally

significant issues and problems. True, there are only a certain number of international law textbooks that we need in the market, and whilst there might even be many around, the TRILA report itself highlighted how only a few are actively used in law schools. How we use the books, though, will depend a lot on the dispositions of the teacher-researcher in question.

Whilst we have well developed approaches to effective teaching, the approach to the research-teaching nexus could be better developed in law schools (and international law as an extension of this). Some headwinds include:

- The reliance on a significant pool of casual academic staff who fill in gaps left open by faculties that have to teach subjects for which they do not have expertise;
- Researchers are being incentivised to do research with less time to teach. As such, they do not take their expertise into the classroom;
- In some jurisdictions, academic staff only teach to ensure that degree offerings are viable, and therefore do not have time to do research;
- Academic staff balance teaching with professional practise where their expertise is also valued and developed, giving them little time to pursue more formal research ambitions.

These reasons all touch on resourcing challenges that faculties face. Further development of this nexus requires cultural changes to the ways in which we think about research. This has to start with the realisation that research does more than just produce products for teaching and learning initiatives. Some ideas to build cultural changes that will support the research-teaching nexus include:

- Helping students see the value and significance of being able to study with ‘thought’ leaders;
- Validating students’ role as researchers, by highlighting how their engagement with materials is itself contributing to change and helping to identify questions and directions for further research;
- Ensuring that critical and normatively oriented materials used during teaching and learning initiatives are validated and encouraged, even if challenging for students and faculty;

- Identifying and supporting novel and boundary pushing courses that will allow students to get used to studying pioneering subject material;
- Creating applied and clinical experiences where students will bring ideas and problems back into the learning environment to discuss and assess in relation to the literature on the subject.

Whilst there are potentially many other good ideas for developing the research-teaching nexus, the point of this discussion has been to highlight the value add of research and researchers to students and the teaching environments we create. More critically, there is potential for research to be applied in changing the way that students think about the world around them. This opportunity needs to be harnessed and further developed in the changing higher education landscape of 2020 and onwards.

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[i] The report was done in 2019 of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 Act which defines what a university is in Australia.

[ii] For instance, comments attributed on p. 17 of the Report to Shahabuddin highlight the problem of World Bank funding of higher education in developing countries which tends to support “profit-making ventures to meet the needs of institutions of economic sustainability.”

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