

## **Hercules at the crossroads: Excellence, prestige and esteem for universities**

Peodair Leihy, Centre for the Study of Higher Education  
University of Melbourne

An Issue and Ideas in Higher Education seminar delivered on 10 June 2009. This is a more or less verbatim transcript.

Hercules is the strongest man in the world. He comes to a crossroads and sees two sisters. One is Arete; she's sort of modestly good looking and says, '*Come with me, you can strive for greatness and glory*'.

The other, Arete's sister, is Kakia. Kakia is absolutely stunning, and she says '*Come with me, I'll give you wealth and pleasure*'.

Now, Arete and Kakia are literally all Greek to us, but being half Greek (and half god) Hercules knows that Arete means excellence, superiority, while Kakia, pretty though she is, means badness. This tips Hercules off, and he chooses the hard graft with Arete over the instant gratification offered by Kakia.<sup>1</sup>

The word *arete* is related to the adjective 'aristos', *best*, which in English we find in words like *aristocracy* – rule by the best, or at least those in the position to say they are. The Latin equivalent of arete is 'excellencia', *excellence*.

When I say equivalent, Arete was viewed as one of the virtues by Aristotle and the Greeks and was worked into a much expanded set of virtues recognised by the Romans, taking the name *Excellencia*.

---

<sup>1</sup> This story is first recorded by Prodikos (465 - 415 BCE). I call Hercules by his Latin (and, customarily, English) name, not the Greek *Herakles*.

Excellence is a little more metaphorical than *Arete*, *being the best*. Excellence is, etymologically, *rising high*. To be high is a good thing – not just for the Romans, this is fairly universal. The heavens are often up. High earthly places tend to be holy places. This is true of the acropolis of Athens, literally its high city. It is true of mountains and rock formations in the dreamings of indigenous Australian nations. Jesus did things on hills; indeed, the Hebrews and Israelites had many of their key moments on mountains – now when Jews immigrate to Israel or make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem they call it ‘*aliyah*’ – *going up*. Moving up is a big metaphor for African American aspiration. So much so, followers of the religion Rastafari speak of *downpression* rather than *oppression*, which they consider to have an unwarranted ‘up’ connotation.

The university is traditionally seen as being on a higher plane in one sense or another. We talk about ‘higher education’ at university and about the higher learning that goes on there. I’ve never been able to work out whether that’s because university is simply higher than high school or whether higher learning is meant to be a calque for the Aristotelian term *sophia*. *Sophia* is wisdom, but a particular kind of intellectual, theoretical, higher wisdom as opposed to other forms of knowledge. In any case, universities have a sort of duty of care to make themselves useful, in various ways, to less high places. Some people, notably those influenced by Thomas Aquinas, see in the university a heightened world, a utopia of sorts. The much earlier theologian Augustine of Hippo’s concept of the City of God, as interpreted by Aquinas and his fellow scholastics, has often been imagined as a sort of theoretical precursor to the university. While Augustine himself meant a somewhat improved form of church, Aquinas and others saw in the City of God a model of living an intellectual, collective life, one which sought to inform the City of Man rather than simply dedicate itself to God unmediated through the real world.

Of course, there’s an argument that, specifically, the rejection of scholasticism defines the

beginnings of the university *per se* and that the more religion the university shed the closer it came to being the institution it is today. Nevertheless, the university was seen as a kind of elevated city of God until modern times.

To go to university is historically an excellent thing in Britain – you figuratively go up to Oxford or Cambridge from anywhere in England, whether you start in the North or the South, in London or a village. You go down from these universities for holidays, you come down when you graduate, and if you're bad enough during term you are sent down. Just as Christians, and Muslims and Buddhists and others have often made their places of worship tall buildings, the ancient universities of Europe present themselves architecturally as cathedrals of scholarship. Matthew Arnold called Oxford the City of Dreaming Spires, emphasising its transcendental qualities.

In Australia, being topologically 'up' in a largely flat city possibly influenced the location of this university, although you might notice its more terrestrial offshoots are gradually slipping down the hill.

To be excellent, it is necessary to excel over others. By being notionally up, universities excel over other places and other institutions with their high-minded pretensions and, of itself, their accrued prestige as places of higher learning.

Given all this excellence, it was not entirely improbable when Canada's Maclean's magazine started in the early 1990s naming its rankings of Canada's universities '*Measuring Excellence*.' I mention this because in his posthumously published work *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP 1996), Bill Readings raised *Measuring Excellence* as an unwelcome example of vapid corporate boosterism in a higher education context.

Now, I've already said that universities are historically and logically excellent, but I do

have a problem with the conceit of ‘measuring excellence’ that goes beyond Readings’s complaint that the term is borrowed from corporate jargon.

While Macleans may have been measuring excellent institutions, it was measuring and comparing not that essential excellence, an excellence over other sorts of places, but what Macleans deemed to be important components of their quality relative to one another. Some of the qualities of some of the universities were excellent within the closed system, that is if they stood out above the corresponding qualities of the other universities, but sometimes rising high over others was not there to measure, neither absolutely, nor even relative to the closed system. The Australian Government’s new Excellence in Research for Australia assessment of course faces similar problems, which we’ll get to later.

This insistence that we don’t confuse quality with excellence (that is, excellent quality) isn’t just semantics. It’s a bit like confusing highness with height – you have to be notably high to have highness, you can be short or low, and still have a height. But excellence isn’t an implied metric like height, it’s a quality that is or isn’t attained, it is highness.

Excellence resides in habitus, it’s a non-transferrable currency of symbolic capital; in less academic terms, it follows Carney’s Law: if you have to say it yourself, it probably isn’t true.

So I’ve defined excellence, possibly preciously or even pedantically. And I think it’s important to acknowledge that one of the reasons we see it thrown around when we’re trying to promote universities, or other institutions, is that when people say ‘*excellence*’ they don’t think of it in any sort of precise way. I think the vagueness, the non-specificity, with which we understand excellence is very much part of its appeal and mystifying power.

Bill Readings felt that the language of excellence that he found all around him in universities and would only find more of today was a mark that management culture was making on universities. Further, he points out in university rhetoric signs of various management systems that had taken root in North America, such as total quality management. While phrases like '*the pursuit of excellence*' have been recycled in both business management and quasi-corporate educational contexts since at least 1958, when a report by that name was commissioned by the Rockefeller Fund, Readings linked their prominence to the management vogues of the 80s and 90s. I think it's important to note that many of these management systems and their attendant vocabularies, total quality management, continuous improvement, just-in-time production, had been imported, inexactly to be sure, into Anglophone culture from Japan. These management systems were never the only source of the language of excellence, but they were a force in proliferating it.

In the 1980s especially, America had come to greatly admire and fear and generally pay attention to Japan, perhaps not its industrial culture per se, but certainly its apparently inexorable rise as an industrial powerhouse. By adapting convenient elements of Japanese management practices Americans were chasing the perceived and stated excellence of Japan. The fact that the US was a little ahead of Japan in transitioning from a mixed industrial economy into a service heavy one did not check the spread of Japanese-style management talk, and it's not that surprising that this language eventually made it into educational settings. The Japanese thirst for excellence had the benefit of being a bit mysterious – inscrutable as they say. The Japanese obviously believed in quality improvement and a quest for excellence; they still do – Japanese stuff is great, if prohibitively expensive. But to non-Japanese this excellence was supported by and mired in otherness, you might speculate it was rooted in the Bushido code of the samurai

or in a meritocracy accommodating of Japan's vestigial caste system<sup>2</sup> rather than rooted in Classical virtues as transmitted through the Protestant work ethic or what have you. Japanese achievement and approaches were obviously worth emulating, but I think the English language of excellence that Readings complained about so much really traded off the idea of this new moving horizon, that is Japan, an horizon that couldn't really be understood, but could be feted as an ideal.

By the time Bill Readings died in plane crash in 1994, demographics, developing labour markets and financial and accounting scandals had hit and Japan was already discredited as an unstoppable economy. Outside Japan, a lot of Japonistic management language started to recede from prominence. But, while less likely to treat certain lost-in-translation management systems as templates, companies all over the world still spoke of their excellence or sought recognition of it. And universities, whose administrators maybe had once known a bit about Japanese-style management but whose marketers and boosters had probably always just liked the tony sound of the word, kept talking about their excellence, even though when Readings's book came out some champions of excellence would have been chastened that their bluster had been exposed. And so we still see publications like the Australian Learning and Teaching Council-funded *Leading Excellence* in the foyer on this floor. 2002 saw the publication of a book about excellence at all levels of education called *The Pursuit of Excellence through Education*, edited by Michael Ferrari. One thing that can be said for the Ferrari book is that excellence is treated from many perspectives and is not just presented as a credential as it might have been a decade previously. Last week in the Australian Higher Education section, there was a parody of the academicisation of language used for primary schooling in which the writer signed off as a professor from the Australian Global Institute for Advanced Excellence in

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Tokugawa legacy* is an explanation of Japanese business mores developed (at least for a non-Japanese readership) by Michael Porter in *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* NY: Free Press 1990 (revised 1998).

University Studies.<sup>3</sup> So the Readings-style mockery goes on, but so does its necessity.

So we keep hearing about excellence in universities because universities like to let us know that they are excellent. They're probably also hopeful that someone will assume that their advertised excellence is a comparative excellence among their competitors. There are many platforms on behalf of universities for elaborating on their claims of excellence – I mentioned the Macleans rankings in Canada. I can't say much about rankings here, because there's so very much to say, but I must say a little. In the last few years the Macleans rankings, like some other surveys in North America, have been subject to a mutiny of non-cooperation from some of the universities whose excellence they measure. Those non-compliances and protests against the validity of the rankings are exceptions that prove the rule that the authority of Macleans and rankings generally is taken very seriously.

Australia's smaller and less diverse university system still has the Good Universities Guide rankings similar in style to the Macleans rankings, but few pay attention to such domestic rankings anymore unless they don't have something more cosmopolitan to boast about. While in Australia we love talking about how wonderfully world class we are, at least in terms of elite universities the benchmark is all the way on the other side of the Pacific, not the other side of the lake; it's understandable that Canada sometimes likes to look at things in a self-consciously parochial frame, as it could feel overwhelmed by the unmatched resources some US universities boast. Australians arguably only lend credibility to international surveys because apparently we have a better faith that the best ten or fifteen universities in the world really are excellent and we need rankings more to conform to that self-evident truth than to advance it. These benchmarks in turn give us something against which to measure the up-and-comers.

---

<sup>3</sup> ST Moir 'Juniors subjected to mortarboarding', *The Australian (Higher Education section)*, 3 June 2009, p. 40.

So I think it's often the case that you determine your lode star, or group of them, and ask, *'Well, what are the salient points that make them excellent over others?'* and then try to find out how much of those qualities others have. Of course, a salient point in the identity of an excellent university is that everyone knows it is; others can't convincingly pretend to excellence without a combination of qualification, delusion and irrational exuberance. I'm not sure you can even ask members of one institution to rank other institutions, as is sometimes done, without the tendency for them naturally to identify the excellent and then daylight and then scratch their heads to order the others.

To use a bad pun, you could describe rankings as returning a *false positive*. They imply *'This is our dispassionate, scientific method for telling you what's what'*, but they rely on that according to intuitive plausibility and value judgments, an essentially normative as opposed to positive, orientation. If you start saying, *'Well, actually, Harvard University, I've done the maths and I can't fit it into this year's top fifty. Not enough Nobel Prizes per cubic metre of library stacks'*, well, then you'd have to change your criteria, until it is restored to rank one, or two, or three.

Prestige begets prestige, as Bourdieu pointed out, but you can't convincingly lay claim to somewhere else's excess or their glory reflected by affirming their greatness and saying *'And look at me too'*. Nevertheless, the up-and-comers, such as the Chinese universities whose rise the quickly trusted (and 'research'-specific) Shanghai Jiao Tong rankings are in part designed to monitor, can benefit from measuring aspects of their capabilities and achievements against accepted, normative standards of excellence. This can be good for Australia's universities – that's getting on the path of excellence.

You know a university is conceding that it feels it has been ranked higher than it deserves and may ever be ranked again when that ranking is consigned to an advertisement. Some of you might recall how one Australian university claimed on tram shelters a few years ago to be both the best university in Australia according to one survey and twenty-second

best university in the world according to another in which it was assessed below ANU. You might call that hybrid excellence – it's mildly mendacious, it's laughable, but it's also pretty harmless. Especially when the real worry is by what sort of metrics would you put two Australian universities in the world's top twenty-two. Conversely, the recent Leiden rankings seem to have been welcomed in Australia as bitter medicine, precisely because their measures seem to make more sense than those that have seemed overly favourable to Australian universities.

Now, in addition to rankings, there are many ways in which excellence is intimated in universities, but I'd largely like to limit myself to two strains that are prominent here in Australia. The first one is vicarious excellence and the second, which I've already touched on, is the excellence of mystification.

I'd like to look at the ideas of excellence, prestige and esteem by looking at university mottos. Now, I don't seriously think university mottos are admissible evidence in building the case of whether they're living up to their founding ideals, largely because few have ever paid much attention to them, but I think they are manifestations of a general appeal for prestige.

I also think that, buried in the aspirational Latin, in the nineteenth century new universities really did try to invest their mottos not only with continuity with previous universities (that is, through the very fact they had mottos and crests etc.), but with points of difference and novelty asserted through the messages. That it was not the done thing to advertise universities in those days only invested proxies for marketing with more power and expectation.

Really old universities tend to have Latin mottos that conflate intellectual, moral and religious illumination. The standing of these old institutions, places like Oxford and Cambridge, then tends to be acknowledged one way or another by nineteenth century

universities. One of the more mordant university mottos is that of University College London – UCL.

The motto of UCL, founded in 1826, might sound trite today, but was deliberately provocative in its time: the university translates the Latin as ‘*Let all come who by merit deserve the most reward*’. Maybe ‘the most reward’ is a mistranslation, the Latin is *praemia palmae*, the victor’s palm leaf, so really it’s forceful symbolic glory, not, as MBA programs advertise, median graduate salary.

Merit for the new UCL was a relative thing. It’s not so much that the first students of UCL were less monetarily privileged than those at its existing competitors Oxbridge (they weren’t); rather, UCL didn’t require its students to swear that they were Anglican. With its motto, UCL says ‘*We don’t have any hidebound restrictions, we just want the most deserving*’ – presumably the smartest or at least most scholarly –, ‘*and we want to empower them further*’. We are the very model of a modern university, as they might have put it later that century, asserting a more core idea of academic excellence.

Australia has two universities dating from the 1850s. You can certainly look at their establishment as part of an expansion and conceptual broadening of higher education generally in the British Empire and elsewhere at the time. The establishment of Sydney and Melbourne Universities, however, should be viewed as much as expressions of colonial self-assertion as they should be seen as outposts of British educational culture in Australia.

The colony of Victoria had only broken away from New South Wales in 1850, but it had the beginnings of a university by 1855. In Melbourne in particular, what should be taught at the university was a bone of contention between the practically-oriented townfolk and the classically educated professors who had been brought out from the (then) British Isles, and by the standards of the day, readily applicable academic learning was to win

out.

It was certainly necessary to assure anyone likely to give the university good money that it was what we would now spin as innovatively practical and relevant, but perhaps as there was some insecurity about whether the university was a *bona fide* one, claims to excellence relied on vicarious projection. That is, Melbourne Uni, and Sydney Uni, like many new universities before and after them, hung their initial credentials to excellence on aspiring equivalence with existing universities through existing traditions and imagery.

Like UCL, Australian universities have telling mottos. Sydney was eventually to arrive at *Sidere mens eadem mutato : With changed sky, the same mind*. Clive James is only half joking when he translates the motto as ‘*Sydney University is really Oxford or Cambridge laterally displaced approximately 12 000 miles.*’<sup>4</sup> James, who went to Sydney in the late 50s and Cambridge in the 60s, begged to differ with their being the same, but in Sydney’s symbolism there is really is a concerted effort to claim some readymade vicarious prestige. Oxford and Cambridge’s crests are in Sydney’s crest; people from Oxford had a hand in founding the university. Their great contemporary John Newman, author of *The Idea of the University*, probably would have had to approve of this emulation; after all, his idea of a perfect university was pretty much the Oxford he was familiar with, except that Newman’s own Dublin University was for Catholics rather than for nominal Anglicans. Adelaide Uni, Australia’s third, has a motto with a similar message to Sydney’s, translating as *light under the southern cross* – skies and stars often make it into mottos, being high up things –, but Sydney’s is better because it’s so explicit about acknowledging that previous intellectual tradition should be emulated and so implicit about the danger that this could otherwise fail to come to be. So these mottos contain claims to excellence, but there seems to be an inkling that the excellence may lose some integrity in transit to the erstwhile benighted southern land.

---

<sup>4</sup> Unreliable Memoirs London: Picador 1981, p. 127.

It took Sydney a while to think of its motto, but Melbourne had its from the start. Melbourne University's motto was the brainchild of Redmond Barry, a jurist and university founder who was evidently much concerned with improving his young colony but is most famous for sentencing the bushranger Ned Kelly to death. It's a very high concept motto, taken from one of the Roman poet Horace's odes (Ode III.30).

Barry distilled the message down to three Latin words, but I'm sure he would be happy for us to consider his allusion to the poem. The words of the motto read *Postera crescām laude* – *I should grow with subsequent praise*, or in the purple prose of university-sanctioned translations *I will grow in the esteem of future generations*.

I was interested to learn recently that the Vice Chancellor, Glyn Davis, actually spoke about the ode before launching Melbourne's current Growing Esteem strategy a couple of years ago.<sup>5</sup> Growing Esteem is of course an updated take on the motto, although it seems to be concerned more with making the university sound like a prudent handler of resources than anything else, that is, as opposed to Davis's predecessor Alan Gilbert's Earning Esteem, which sounded a lot more bluntly mercenary. Now, I don't think there's anything fundamentally wrong with recasting mottos for modern purposes, but I would caution anyone trying to sell, among other things, a university's reputation, against being too direct about stocks of esteem or glory. Again, Carney's Law, if you have to say it, people might start to wonder if it's true. To that end, at least Growing Esteem has a pin striped restraint to its boastfulness; it's not too tawdry when it come to leveraging status.

Well, it is reassuring to know that behind Growing Esteem there was some consideration of the context from whence those words were derived. In the ode, Horace's great literary

---

<sup>5</sup> For awareness of Davis's discussion, I am indebted to Prof. Stephanie Trigg and her *Humanities Researcher* blog entry on the motto 'Monday Melbourne Medievalism Blogging (5) Postera Crescam Laude', 3 February 2009.

conceit is a sophisticated false modesty. Normally, the most surefire sign of greatness in Rome was a distinguished ancestry, and Horace did not boast a noble pedigree, in fact he was the son of a freed slave. On the one hand, Horace relied very much on his wealthy patrons and was a well-practised flatterer of the ruling regime, on the other hand, by letting everyone know his own lowly birth, he reminds his audience that he is a personally talented new man rather than a blue blood with a vanity press.

When Horace is saying *postera crescā laude* he is in the middle of elaborating, under the cloak of irony, how his fame will outlive him, how he will achieve a certain literary immortality and, specifically, he says – *I, the newcomer, should grow with subsequent praise*. He's says 'Yes it's counterintuitive that my modest self will grow in reputation', but he *is* saying it's going to happen. Now, in borrowing the sentiment, Redmond Barry and the university would have both appreciated the ironical mode and not shied away from promising much. After all, Horace's mock-outlandish boast of future glory very much came true. Melbourne Uni, also a newcomer, would have felt somewhat obliged to flatter the existing order and the universities that preceded it. In addition to that deference, however, I think Melbourne is making a virtue of its newness, it's making a claim of precocious ambition.

I think it's interesting that the word *esteem* made it into the received translation of the Latin. Esteem is this sort of involuntary and ongoing sensation in a spectator; praise, or the Latin *laus* found in the motto, is quite different; praise is instances of admiration given voice. Redmond Barry wanted praise, praise for the university, possibly praise for himself. I think there's some humour and humility there. By construing praise as esteem, the self-deprecatory charm of wanting a 'pat on the head' is gone, but the desperately earnest idea that the university is performing for an audience is only underscored. Melbourne Uni, a century and a half after Barry, doesn't need the esteem of future generations so much as the self-esteem not to care what others think. But it cares about the esteem and praise of others more than ever.

Now, in terms of their messages in esoteric Latin, I don't think either Sydney or Melbourne or Adelaide's mottos preclude the version of hard work with Arete or excellence presented to Hercules at the crossroads. But sometimes you could be forgiven for thinking they are, with the accoutrements of vicarious excellence often trotted out in current day marketing, hedonistically luxuriating in the pretence to having made it already— as Arete's sister Kakia offers. They're claiming the symbolic glory as part of their inheritance of university tradition, and they are in danger of squandering that inheritance rather than continuing on its path.

It was usual for universities to adopt Latin mottos before the twentieth century. I don't know to what extent you can say that this was part of universities seeing themselves as a continuation of a Classical Greek and Roman liberal tradition in which the virtue of excellence was a trope. It is notable, however, that when new universities stopped routinely selecting Latin mottos, the place of a classical orientation in the liberal tradition had become contested. Non-Latin mottos often seem deliberate; Stanford took a German motto because its founders in the 1880s believed German was becoming the language of science and learning, once the place of Latin; it took German politics rather than German-speaking scientists to prove Stanford wrong. By the time higher education expanded after the Second World War, anything but Latin seemed to be the go; so in Australia we have Italian for the Monash motto, Middle English for Macquarie and French for Latrobe. And they tend to have relatively grounded, even didactic, messages; *I'm still learning* at Monash, *And gladly teach* at Macquarie, *Whoever seeks shall find* at Latrobe. And of course the newer the university the more likely it is to have a motto in plain, direct and business-like English – claiming openness and modernity but not jettisoning the forms of symbolic excellence entirely. It is high stakes when a motto is in English – it's easier to get it wrong when people can understand it. Edith Cowan University has the terrifying motto *Freedom through knowledge*. The liberal ideal, or *Arbeit Macht Frei* for the information age? Whose poor taste – mine or theirs?

Whatever the motto, I would aver that getting back on the path to excellence must involve eschewing some of the insecure big noting and self-promotion to which universities commit themselves. If you look at the history of higher education in Australia, there were plenty of lost weekends, some lasting for years, when poor governance especially, but also other factors like cultural cringe within and without the universities, held back potential. Marketing is neither directly here nor there for substance if it's not getting in the way of work. But, now it could be that the boosterism of a marketing orientation is obscuring the true, humble path to excellence.

New universities build on existing tradition, but it's important to note that they should not uncritically adopt those traditions. Perhaps, to borrow again from Pierre Bourdieu, they rely on their would-be peers, established universities, for recognition and consecration, but universities are created not by other universities, but by essentially educational, sometimes civilisational, pioneers and visionaries (boosters, even) who petition political authorities for charters. Yes, vicarious excellence is an element of marketing, but at some point automatic deference to those you would hope to come to see as your peers – your competitors if you will – becomes a liability.

In addition to vicarious excellence, which new universities claim somewhat out of necessity but established universities try to access through association or comparison with accepted archetypes, the excellence of mystification seems to be a widespread resort today. Here, the idea is to be sparing with specificity and allow the spectator or participant to imagine the details. In terms close to home, to allow them to *dream large*.

From an excellence point of view, the problem with mysterious aspirational imagery often used in advertising is that it often seems that Hercules has gone the dissipate way of Kakia rather than embarked on the path to glory with Arete.

Prestige is a key component of the mystification of excellence. The word *prestige* comes from a word meaning a trick or sleight of hand – you may remember the novel and film about illusionists in recent years called *The Prestige*, which refers both to the characters' ambition and their magic tricks. And *prestige is* a confidence trick – it's the amount of symbolic credit you have for deployment or exploitation. And, as I've said before, it should be self-defeating to go around telling everyone that you are prestigious. And yet it seems to work to some extent. You often hear the word prestige associated with aspirants – *the prestigious* is an epithet you hear a lot with Australia's Group of Eight or Britain's twenty-member Russell Group; it's less commonly heard with less contextually and more absolutely prestigious inner sanctums like the Ivy League or Oxbridge, and you only hear it applied to Japan's Imperial universities category as editorialising in translation.

Excellence is a slippery idea, but claims to excellence seek to imply both substantive attractions and realisable potential. If you can make a plausible claim to excellence without going into too much detail it is great – to some extent excellence is irreducible, and therefore the mystique of claimed excellence misdirects the eye from more testable components of a solid footing. To claim a knowingly nebulous excellence and imply that this excellence means good services, products, standards, teaching, et cetera downstream is a case of not so much lying as inviting a logical fallacy (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*). That is, inviting spectators to deduce that by being excellent, this excellence must be supported by the most fitting substance.

Excellence has a temporal dimension. A claim to excellence might at its most basic mean *I am excellent now, look at me*. But practically, the claim means here is the evidence, from the past, instilled summatively in me now. This excellence, in turn, has the purpose of auguring great things for the future. And I suppose that's there in the notion of excellence as rising high – it's a trajectory. I understand from some signs about the place that the University of Melbourne is engaging in a Festival of Ideas in which '*the present is past and the future has arrived*'. If that means the uni is or merely wants to be ready to test

its mettle on big issues like climate change and cultural change rather than simply say it's got the capacity to do so one day, then I applaud it.

The Australian Research Council (ARC) has always had a penchant for excellence, at least the word excellence. It set up centres for excellence decades ago. The emergence of excellence in Canberra's new research quality evaluation system, called Excellence in Research for Australia, is quite signal. On the one hand, there's a derivative, emulative element in that the UK *Research Assessment Exercise* is recast as *Excellence in Research for Australia*, so the British RAE becomes ERA. On the other hand, the Australian wording is startling. I know that the British who can afford to be are incorrigibly low-key while Australians are somewhat notorious for ameliorative inflation – for subpar, we say 'ordinary' (or even 'average'), for good we say 'sensational' – but substituting *excellence* for the self-effacing, almost apologetically contingent *exercise* when you're making an anagram of an acronym really does indicate culture shock. Excellence in Research for Australia is worrying not only from the point of view that excellence can be something of a weasel word with all its meaning sucked out, but also because the advent of this scheme could suggest that there was little or no excellence before the ERA came to save the day. Which is a little melodramatic and dismissive. Or, again, it could suggest that everyone has excellence.

I think one aspect of excellence by mystification is the use of language that is intended to sound impressive to outsiders and avoid jarring the eyes and ears of invested insiders. Here, for a somewhat familiar point of reference we can return to the Growing Esteem phrase here at Melbourne. Growing should be exactly the right idea when it comes to the Herculean concept of excellence; it suggests an ongoing process, it's moving upwards. I can see, however, how Growing Esteem could be a turn off for members of the university, positioning them as subject to management rather than participating in their own destiny. A person can grow, intransitively, an organisation can similarly grow. You can figuratively grow a new part – grow wings – or grow into a state – grow bold –, but

generally you don't grow an object in this reflexive sense of *grow*. Now, transitively, a gardener can grow something. You can't really grow money, but it's a metaphor we understand— with heavy undertones of the gardener's vigilance and care on the part of the money manager. So can you grow esteem? Well, we understand what is meant, but I think you have to go via the gardener and the banker to get there. You could say that in Growing Esteem, the university is growing its reputation like a gardener or banker, rather than growing in the intrinsic, reflexive sense.

Well, Growing Esteem is more a campaign than a campaign slogan. The slogan is *dream large*. Dream large always reminds me of those Chinese posters from the cultural revolution that say '*Practise self-criticism*' - much like being told to self-criticise, if you have to be told to dream large, you feel like you're going to be watched doing it. You'd better manage an acceptable dream; don't let anyone down now.

At least dream large is so high falutin that it allows you to take it or leave it. Another example of the use of excellence in mystifying ways is conspicuously advertising the path of excellence as a commitment to reform, as if that lip service is an achievement in itself. I've said that excellence was a Greek and Roman virtue. Why not make it an organisational value in modern times?

Victoria University (or VU) has as one of its seven 'values' '*the pursuit of excellence in everything we do*'.

Can you tell someone else to pursue excellence? It is a bit invasive to make Hercules' choice on his behalf, and it could sully and compromise the drive for greatness and glory. The drive for excellence will always be somewhat internal and personal; an organisation can encourage it but not demand it.

Now, in case you're thinking there's a possibility that VU allows its students and

employees to take or leave this value, *the pursuit of excellence in everything we do*, by merely burying it in an obscure charter or other such document, there are posters throughout the campuses asking ‘*Have you lived our values today?*’ and listing them. A commitment to the values is also a standard criterion for job applications.

Historically, we haven’t been able to live anything other than life, but due to the nature of things like imposed value systems, we can now live values like *the pursuit of excellence in everything we do*. VU’s marketers shouldn’t be criticised too much, however, as the university has made great strides in terms of basic brand awareness, albeit from a low base, in recent years, largely due to upbeat marketing. Even so, the conspicuous pursuit of excellence is probably further up the hierarchy of needs than the institution is at this stage.

Unlike vicarious excellence, the mystique of excellence has a prerequisite modicum of repute. That is, you can’t dabble in the vagaries of individual excellence until you have some stored credibility to gamble. Repute or credibility often don’t need to be so much the fuel as the catalyst for prestige.

The credential of a university charter is obviously a desirable of itself, but sometimes it requires confidence to deploy university status for prestige. I’ve spoken about nineteenth century universities, but the establishment of Australia’s mid-twentieth century universities further illuminates the challenge of balancing differentiation and equivalence.

The story goes that when the first Monash students, stringent though their courses were, reached graduation in the early 1960s, a petition was circulated calling on their degrees to be conferred by Melbourne Uni, in the manner in which some of the regional universities in NSW were in their first years colleges of UNSW. Apparently some students were worried that their degrees would not be immediately recognised in Britain, recalling the

same anxiety over metropolitan respectability held by colonial universities in the nineteenth century.

Anyway, that was fortunately a short-lived anxiety, especially given that one of the great things about being a chartered university is you're trusted to give out your own degrees – just ask Central Queensland. Within ten years of opening, Monash was signing off on degrees taught by the Canberra Institute of Advanced Education, which lasted until that institute became Canberra University in 1993 – Monash obviously was a proper university after all.

Likewise, a couple of decades after Monash opened, when RMIT was first allowed to deliver bachelor degree courses, the degrees had to be certified by Melbourne University. When RMIT and similar institutions did become universities, ideally they had the opportunity not simply to substitute academic excellence for applied know-how, if you like, but instead to add a bit of prestigious mystique to the grounded traditions of which the artisan class was duly proud. I think earnest artisanal pride has gradually lost out there, but maybe I'm just bitter about my bathroom renovation.

It's interesting that quite a few newer universities in Australia were chartered with the title 'University of Technology' – Swinburne, VU, Curtin. Some seem to resent these former polytechnics shedding the T (the Victorian government forthrightly continued to address correspondence to VUT long after the university changed its own stationery) – it can seem a bit like bullying, telling these new players they have to wear the 'of technology' as a sort of mark of Cain. These people forget that one of our best universities, UNSW, got its charter as NSWUT in 1948. The T seems to work for RMIT and UTS and QUT, just as IIT works for the most prestigious places of Indian higher education, but losing the T can also be an assertion that we are a real, unqualified university.

I may criticise playing up mystique, but eradicating it is definitely bad for morale. Historically, universities risk losing a lot of their prestige when symbols of the medieval heritage of being places of scholarly pilgrimage are taken away. Such as the tradition of naming universities after cities, which can make them sound like shrines (note also that the ‘college towns’ in which US universities sit serve as holonyms that convey either intimate or collegial respect – Cambridge, South Bend, Chapel Hill etc.). Examples of quashing this individual mystique include when Napoleon recommissioned his nation’s once independent universities, boarded-up during the revolution, as academies of the centrally controlled University of France in 1808. I think it’s fair to say the prestige and capacities of French comprehensive universities never fully recovered from that episode. Similarly, New Zealand organised all higher education under the banner of the University of New Zealand from the 1870s, when the fledgling University of Otago had already begun to establish its own identity. Other campuses, were they originally called the University of Auckland and so forth, might have stood a chance of better developing their own identities before the UNZ scheme ended in 1961. Of course, independent identity is most important to the above average – the more above average, the more so. People call Berkeley *California* or *Berkeley*; to call it *UC Berkeley* is formal and almost pejorative given its history of independent excellence even though it was originally named simply the University of California. It has no need to bill itself as UC; UC Santa Cruz does.

In the present day, universities can de-emphasise their own sense of place by drawing focus to externalities and their own instrumentality. The globe seems to be a big symbol in university advertising. I think *dream large* is, just as *Postera crescam laude* was originally, very high concept, it’s not too literal. Monash’s current advertising seems to have been inexorably attracted to that void in literalness. With its Get Started-Go Places-Go Boldly-Choose Monash and Monash Passport slogans, Monash says pretty much the same thing as Melbourne in a categorically lower register of the same sort of advertising tosh. Well, to be fair, go boldly is a paraphrase of Star Trek and so connotes potential space travel, which is one order of magnitude above a merely global outlook.

Nevertheless, it strikes me as pedestrian compared to the level of mystification Melbourne cooks with – I mean, who ever doubted a Monash degree can help take you overseas or to the moon, and why do people need to be told it can? What a banal excellence.

I'm not saying that to be facetious or rude – Monash has been hoping to capitalise on prospective students who want quicker qualifications or double degrees fleeing the Melbourne Model, chiefly by painting itself as the steady drummer, the safe pair of hands.

The difference between the Melbourne and Monash approaches seems to be largely the degree of imagining done on behalf of the targeted individuals. While literalism is no doubt not out of place for a chartered or certified practising accountant qualification, ads for which will point out you can use it to get to Shanghai or Zurich (rather than just to your accounting firm's offices in Shanghai or Zurich), I would think the imaginations of prospective and existing university students and researchers deserve the benefit of the doubt.

Some of the mystifying excellence we see in university advertising seems to be a kind of non-communication. Rudimentary concepts like brand recognition aside, lots of readily comprehensible information is completely missing from some of these claims of excellence. Obviously behind the advertising there are important structural changes at Melbourne and a drive at Monash literally to internationalise student experience further with more overseas exchanges, but it's fascinating the advertising doesn't focus more on developing these important points of difference, instead focussing on the idea that the world is your oyster. Or the galaxy is.

I'm not a marketing person, but how Melbourne University has managed to take a program of important, differentiating and potentially very attractive structural changes

and turn them into a nebulous smokescreen of language and images is beyond my ken. If I were the University of Melbourne, I'd be saying we really are changing. Because, while some may then be rudely disabused of the notion that this inveterately excellent institution can't be improved on, many would say thank heavens they're changing – tell us more.

One hypothesis I have for the preference of mystification over plain communication when there are substantive changes to advertise is that universities get cold feet when it comes to the idea of reform. University reform is a bit like a twelve step program; the first thing you have to do is admit you have a problem. Leading institutions within a quasi-closed system – places like this one – are best placed to have the confidence both to reform and own up to it, but perceived external downsides often make them think again or cool their enthusiasm.

On a practical level, I think we do see signs of this university attempting to navigate a path of excellence of its own. We know that Melbourne Uni fell back in the rankings when the Melbourne Model was introduced, as student-teacher ratios went down. It's not a problem that this happened given the structural changes, what would be a problem is if the uni can't, for example, negotiate to moving to more general undergrad degrees with senior staff teaching some courses and masters courses with senior staff teaching most courses, as is consistent with the model's US inspiration, or at least the US system at its enviable best. The descriptive and reductive alchemy that can be found in the suite of measures that are used to divine excellent universities will never provide an entirely adequate prescriptive blueprint for adopting the path to excellence. Working on internally observed opportunities for improvement and worrying less about externally conferred respect requires a fresh discipline from our universities.

In a preponderantly publicly funded system – although student fees are ever more important – excellence is a hard path to tread politically. In Australia, there have been

instances of some of the more innovative accounting for research income attracting cries of no fair. ‘*Research hogs rot the system*’ read the recent headline,<sup>6</sup> as if to present research funding as a sort of finite pie and a zero-sum game.

Specifically, Sydney University was cited for reporting to the government research income from joint ventures with medical research institutions to boost appearances. Is such accounting cheating, or does it add real net value somehow? Now, creative accounting will happen whenever possible – therefore, when the distribution of actual funding is directly involved, some discretionary, contestable element is necessary. I don’t know how well set up for that the ARC’s Excellence in Research for Australia is, but I think its metrics are going to have to juggle the positive and normative frames of reference much as university rankings do.

You can’t blame some of the best of an ordinary bunch for wanting the chance to compete better with excellent universities overseas, seeking a sort of exponential incentive with government money proportionately matching money they can associate themselves with elsewhere. It’s important to remember, however, that higher education in Australia needs development as a sector. The idea of the more money you get the more money you get is certainly not new to central grant allocation. The scenario of tending to reward those with most resources was particularly prominent during the Cold War in the US with a perceived urgent need for technological advancements. This funding principle allowed the rewarding of US research universities that got things done. The US and Australian Governments alike want to back winners, they want private enterprise somewhat aligned with national priorities, they would like to think tax payers’ money is instrumental in helping something get done, not the reason for doing it – a little more money can elevate endeavour beyond grant cycles. Rather than frantically trying to back winners, however, regulators in Australia do need to worry more about nurturing a system with as much bite

---

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Lane, *The Australian* (Higher Education section), 26 May 2009, p. 19.

as bark and one less dependent on international student fees, so that there might be sustainable winners to back in the future.

Sometimes you hear the observation that Australia should more realistically aim for an excellent university system rather than some excellent universities. It sounds like that might involve better coordination of energies. The model held up is generally California's public higher education system (which isn't *all that* coordinated, it must be said). Two points: excellent institutions and an excellent system aren't mutually exclusive and, more applicably, it's important not to act as if Australia has a choice between the two rather than a monumental task ever to have either.

Ironically, the excellent system idea is often raised by the most struggling universities in Australia. Ironic because when you compare the Californian UC, Cal State and community college network to what Australia has, what is missing are the really excellent research universities and departments within universities at the top, with, relative to Australian universities, lots of research money and endowment. Well that and California's proximity to the other universities (great, good and otherwise) in the US. Still, maybe a handful of Australian universities should be advocating that sort of excellent system.

Furthermore, unlike California's public system, Australia doesn't have a Stanford or a Caltech – outstanding private universities – to complement the system. Australia did have a Stanford brother – the brother of Stanford's founder much increased the family fortune here in the wake of the Victorian gold rush, but unfortunately he seems to have sent some of his takings back to Palo Alto rather than setting up a university here.

But as good as the Californian system is, it's crucial not to lionise it blindly. It is a good thing that the structure of the booming State of California was there to build this system up as the state rose to prominence last century. But now the fact that that particular

state government is largely responsible for funding especially the teaching and building maintenance part of the system has become more a hindrance than a help. As for Australia's universities, if I were to diagnose them with a single criticism, it is that we have a system for the way the country is, not the way it can and will need to be.

Just to recap, universities are caught in an hyperbolic spiral of claims to excellence; but the truly excellent have no need to claim it. Bill Readings turns in his grave as the language of excellence grows ever thicker. University rankings are good in that they encourage improvement according to their points of reference, and bad in that they encourage talk of excellence. University mottos are enjoyable and revealing, but I don't think they often succeed entirely in transfusing the prestige of their models.

Mystification makes for excellent advertising, but it's a pity it can obscure genuine incremental or radical reforms. People are apparently happiest that way. Australian universities want better funding, but they also seem to have trouble articulating their place in the scheme of things; a cacophony of claims to excellence doesn't help. The myth of Hercules we started with suggests that secured wealth and glory are two separate paths. Of course, universities need more money, and they need to go about acquiring it strategically, but rather than expending energy telling everyone how great and prestigious they are, they need to work on becoming greater. And you can't measure that sort of greatness in money, however objective money may be as a metric in other circumstances. Maybe you can't measure working towards greatness at all. But aiming high and sincerely is what excellence is all about.