

EXTRACT FROM THE ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE
KING'S COLLEGE COMMEMORATION DINNER

Hon. Justice Martin Daubney

5 May 2015

Some might consider it a little curious that at King's we continue to celebrate an occasion that hasn't actually occurred at the University of Queensland for about the last 50 years. The University's Commemoration Week was held at this time of year, and centred on graduation ceremonies and associated dinners, balls and parades. It faded away during the 1960s.

Our University undoubtedly inherited the tradition of Commemoration celebrations from the Oxford colleges. Just as the Cambridge colleges at this time of year hold their fabulous May Balls, this is the time when the Commemoration Balls are held in the Oxford colleges – glittering white-tie affairs held after the end of the last full term of the English academic year – during Commemoration Week, so known because of the ceremonies held in the university to commemorate its benefactors.

For my part, I don't think it at all odd that we continue an observance which serves as a valuable link from the past to the future. It gives us the opportunity to acknowledge the generosity of our benefactors, and to congratulate and celebrate the contributions of past and present Kingsmen to the life of the College.

So, we gather this evening to "commemorate". The classicists here – of which there are many – would remind us of the derivation of the word "commemorate" – the Latin *memorare* ("to remember"), with the prefix *com-*, which acts as an intensifier. We gather not just in an act but in a celebration of remembrance – a festival occasion on which we bring to mind the things for which we are grateful.

In that context, then, allow me to make a few observations about the special place of our colleges here at the University of Queensland.

Nearly three years ago, I had the honour of delivering the Centenary Address in this Dining Room. My central thesis was that it is not only desirable but absolutely necessary for King's to draw its inspiration from a firm foundation of moral principle. I identified that principle as the clutch of moral virtues encapsulated by the word "integrity" and argued that when integrity ceases to be the essence of our pursuits in this College, we will have ceased to be a place of higher learning and become nothing more than a secular provider of serviced accommodation.

That proposition applies with equal force to each of our colleges. We know that they are more than mere boarding houses. Each college, imbued with its own particular ethos, strives to provide a complete program to enhance the learning and development of several thousand young men and women each year.

Advertising ourselves as something more than just student accommodation providers might make us feel good and enable us to justify to ourselves the range of extra-curricular activities and services we offer to our students. But our assertions are syllogistic conclusions. They necessarily assume not just that there is a place in a contemporary secular research university for colleges such as ours but that it is a good thing for the colleges to continue to exist in that context.

Of course, those of us inside the college “beltway” would instinctively affirm both of those assumptions, not least because engagement in our colleges lends meaning to our particular lives. Those outside the college milieu, however, might not share our blind faith in the value of colleges, just as they might question the utility of us gathering this evening to perpetuate an otherwise dormant tradition.

So let us take a few moments to drill down into those assumptions and see whether they pass muster or whether they might most gently be described as anachronistic.

The University of Queensland is not just a contemporary secular research university; it is one of the world’s leading secular research universities. That is a fact, and that is, by any measure, a very good thing for our society. It has some 51,000 undergraduate and post-graduate students, more than 7,000 staff, nine world-leading research institutes, and a budget this year of some \$1.8 billion.

In short, it is a very big undertaking. And in the contemporary secular capitalist society in which it operates, the University, as a state institution, is necessarily a very big secular undertaking. It is also a very big secular undertaking which operates in an increasingly challenging environment – it is sufficient to mention concerns associated with university and research funding, the practical necessity for our university to attract foreign students and to balance that with offerings for domestic students, and, in reflection of one of the hallmarks of an advanced capitalist society, the need to compete generally in an increasingly vigorous domestic and international tertiary education sector.

So is there a place in such a university for colleges such as ours? By that, of course, I do not mean whether there is a place for us as mere accommodation providers – the clear answer to that prosaic question is “of course”. The present query is whether there is a place within this secular university for institutions like ours which maintain and proclaim the life of a student within the particular ethos of our colleges.

The easiest way to test that is by reference to the university itself. The University has adopted a Vision statement which is intended to guide it through the present and the future. Its vision is simply stated: “UQ: knowledge leadership for a better world”.

The University has also expressly articulated its values – the beliefs and ideals which it regards as good and desirable. Its stated values are:

- Pursuit of excellence
- Creativity and independent thinking
- Honesty and accountability
- Mutual respect and diversity
- Support of the people in the UQ community.

Time prevents me from descending into detail, but it is abundantly clear that, by their own ideological and ethical commitments, our colleges share in and contribute to the achievement of this vision and these values – leaving aside the academic tutoring which we all provide to our students, it is sufficient to refer to the various leadership and personal development programs we provide for our students expressly for the purpose of enabling them to apply the knowledge they acquire at this university in their future leadership roles for the betterment of the wider community.

To say that the colleges have a place in the university, however, is not the end of the story. In order to make good on our original proposition, we also have to be persuaded that the existence of colleges in the university is a good thing – good for the university, obviously; good for our students; and good for society generally.

Our university is, as I have already said, of necessity a secular institution subscribing, as we have seen, to avowedly humanistic values. In that regard, it is, I would suggest, no different from any of the other great secular research universities in the world.

Colleges have long been integral to the fabric of western universities. From the time in the 11th and 12th centuries when separate universities began to emerge from the religious halls of learning, colleges have played an important, and often defining, role in the development of those institutions. But the modern research university is a galaxy away from the medieval *Alma Mater Studiorum* of Bologna.

There has over recent years been a robust debate about what is, and what should be, the proper role and purpose of education within a contemporary research university. On one side are those whom I would describe as the pragmatists – we engage in research for the betterment of the world around us and, as a necessary concomitant, we provide tuition in selected courses of study to students who sign on for a course of instruction.ⁱ On the other sideⁱⁱ are those, described somewhat controversially as “educational romanticists”ⁱⁱⁱ, who mourn higher education’s failure to address the bigger, interdisciplinary issues resulting in

pursuit of the meaning of life being sacrificed in favour of, for example, the marketing of marketing degrees.

The acclaimed contemporary Scottish-American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has described modern American research universities in the following terms:

Research universities through their various postgraduate enterprises provide the specialized and professionalized human resources and skills needed in an advanced capitalist society, not only specialized and professionalized research scientists, but also physicians, economists, lawyers, MBAs, engineers, and experts in public relations and advertising. Undergraduate education for the most part attaches to those institutions that prepare their students most effectively for admission to prestigious graduate programs. So the curriculum has increasingly become one composed of an assorted ragbag of disciplines and sub-disciplines, each pursued and taught in relative independence of all the others, and achievement within each consists in the formation of the mind of a dedicated specialist.^{iv}

MacIntyre's description of research universities in those terms sets up his arguments that there is a need for greater understanding of the relationships between the disciplines within modern universities and even, more fundamentally, that there is a need for a revitalization of the study of philosophy as a pan-disciplinary underpinning of a university's pursuits.

We are obviously not going to resolve this debate tonight, but there are two important points which can be made uncontroversially.

The first is that arguments of this kind are almost as old as universities themselves. In about 1260, for example, St Thomas Aquinas was highly critical of the curriculum arrangements at the University of Paris. Over its first 100 years or so, the university's arts curriculum had gradually segmented into piecemeal and largely independent studies of logic, physics, ethics and metaphysics. Completion of the arts curriculum was a necessary precursor to studies in theology, law or medicine, although many students never studied beyond the arts. Aquinas thought this piecemeal approach to the arts was defective, and advocated a clear structure of teaching and learning. He said a student should first acquire skills in grammar and logic, and then move to the study of mathematics, followed by the natural sciences. According to Aquinas, it was only when those logical, mathematical and scientific studies had been completed that a student would be able to engage fruitfully in the enquiries of moral and political philosophy. This ordering was necessary because, in Aquinas' view, the ends of education can only correctly be developed with reference to the final end of human beings (that is, achievement of a perfected understanding), and the ordering of a curriculum has to be an ordering to that final end.^v

The further detail of Aquinas's argument is not important for present purposes. What is important is to understand that over the entire 900 year history of university education

questions have been raised as to the ways in which universities prepare students for life, and not merely their chosen vocations.

Secondly, and importantly, even if the pragmatists' view of the proper role and purpose of a contemporary research university is correct, the concerns of the so-called romanticists can be, and in many ways are, addressed by our colleges providing our students with an ethical environment within which to contextualize their vocational studies. In other words, on both views of the role and purpose of a contemporary secular research university, the contributions made by colleges are objectively good:

- For the "pragmatists", the college environment, as an adjunct to the university's tuition, augments the capacity and capability of students to excel in their chosen vocations;
- For the "romanticists", the touchstone of integrity which characterizes our particular college environments works symbiotically with the university's tuition to produce students with purposeful vocations.

It follows, then, that our assumptions are correct. There is a place for our colleges in this university and it is, objectively, a good thing that we do what we do in the way that we do it.

What that means is that it is appropriate that we call to mind this evening the spirit of integrity which guides us in all we do at King's and which is the essential hallmark of all of the colleges here at the University of Queensland.

And that is something which, in my respectful view, is well worth commemorating.

Endnotes:

ⁱ See, for example, Stanley Fish "Save the World on Your Own Time" (OUP, 2008)

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Mark C. Taylor, "Crisis on Campus" (Knopf, 2010)

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Murray, "Real Education" (Crown Forum, 2009)

^{iv} Alasdair MacIntyre "God, Philosophy, Universities" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), pp 173-174

^v See generally MacIntyre, op. cit. chapter 11