

Economics: An Elite Subject soon only available in Elite Universities?

John Lodewijks*

University of New South Wales

J.Lodewijks@unsw.edu.au

Anthony Stokes

Australian Catholic University

Tony.Stokes@acu.edu.au

Sarah Wright

Australian Catholic University

Sarah.Wright@acu.edu.au

Abstract

There are some alarming stories coming out of the UK about the state of academic economics there. It appears that Economics is becoming an elite subject for elite UK universities. This paper examines the Australian situation to see if similar trends exist. The similarities between the UK and Australian situation are disturbing and present a challenge to economists, and to the economics community and society as a whole.

Introduction

This paper presents some alarming stories coming out of the UK about the state of academic economics there. It then compares the Australian situation to see if there are parallels. The issues at stake are considerable;

* Helpful comments from Eric Sovey are gratefully acknowledged.

in essence they amount to depriving large numbers of university students of economic literacy. Skewing access to the study of economics has the potential to not just harm the career prospects of the socially disadvantaged but also to weaken public discussion of pressing economic issues.

The UK authors, that we will discuss shortly, refer to a 1970 article by George Stigler, who argued that an understanding of economics can not only improve personal decision making throughout life and has, as well, a pivotal role to play in a well-functioning democracy by allowing citizens to contribute more fully to debates on the major economic issues of the day. This may now be increasingly in jeopardy. Economics may or may not be a “superior” discipline (Fourcade, Ollion & Algan 2015) but its impact will be limited if its principles are not diffused widely.

The paper highlights the UK situation and then compares it with recent developments in Australia. It finds that the parallels are very close indeed. Unravelling the cause and effect relationships is not easy but we hope that others will similarly take up the challenge.

The UK Situation

The total number of students studying at UK’s universities increased by 13.5 per cent between 2003/04 and 2011/12. In economics the increase was far higher: 48.9 per cent. Clearly economics in the UK appears in very good health, but unfortunately not everywhere and not for everyone. Over the past decade economics has disappeared from large parts of the UK’s

higher education landscape. The UK situation summarized here derives from an audit of economics programs utilizing a data set of 65 new and 54 old universities as reported in Talbot, Reeves & Johnston 2013, Johnston, Reeves & Talbot 2014 and Talbot, Reeves & Johnston 2014.

There was a wave of new universities established in the UK after 1992, transformed from former polytechnics and colleges of higher education. The new institutions accorded university status now outnumber the old ones. However, 91 per cent of old universities offer economics degrees while only 25 per cent of new universities do (in Scotland, in particular, the comparable figures are 100 per cent and 0 per cent). Only 20 new universities and 53 old universities provide students with the possibility of studying for a single degree in economics, business economics or financial economics (TRJ 2014: 15; JRT 2014: 595).

Much of the decline in economics programs has occurred over the last decade. Between 2006-2012 the number of economics degrees on offer in the UK fell by 11.3 per cent (JRT 2014: 591). Since 2003-04 twelve universities have completely removed undergraduate economics degree programs. The authors conclude that while economics is very healthy in the old universities, it has largely disappeared from many new universities, particularly in the north of the UK. Those students that are unlikely to gain admission to a top university are then unable then to study economics in any depth.

The reason for the reemergence of the binary divide in economics – and it should be noted that while many economics programs have been withdrawn altogether there has also been a decline in number of UK

universities offering degree programs in sciences, mathematics, modern languages and humanities – is multi-faceted. The authors suggest that new universities were under more financial pressures, and have withdrawn from the mature market for degrees in traditional disciplines to avoid direct competition from the older universities and instead moved into more niche academic areas of vocational learning to differentiate themselves - “training people for work rather than providing an education per se” (JRT 2014: 605). Hence the new universities were closing marginally viable economics programs or promoting Business Studies which is seen as a substitute for Economics. In some institutions economics has been actively run down as part of a deliberate policy to boost other programs. Restructures have abolished separate economics departments and merged them into business schools with economists required to teach non-economics subjects in the management and business areas. Economics fared better where student demand remained high, economics had support from senior management and staff were extensively engaged in external income generation and active in University service roles (TRJ 2014: 17).

A further factor was the widening of student access to university. Yet the wider access was often limited to the less prestigious universities with students from lower socio-economic groups attending new rather than old universities. The older universities were dominant in attracting young, first-time entrants from privately educated and financially well-off backgrounds. Universities that draw their intake from geographical areas with more affluent backgrounds are more likely to continue to offer the subject. The authors note that economics has become the preserve of top universities

and 'economics has effectively become an elite subject whose provision is largely the preserve of some elite universities catering to a select group of students' (TRJ 2013: 43).

A final important factor was the effect of formal national research evaluation on universities in the UK. University managers are more likely to retain a program if the academics involved are highly-rated researchers. Of the 66 universities offering an economics program, only half provided an economics submission to be evaluated in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. Only three of the 19 new universities offering an economics degree submitted economics for evaluation (TRJ 2014: 16).

Many other pertinent comments were made about the UK situation. It was noted that economics was perceived as more intellectually demanding by students and those with weak preparations preferred business studies. Females were less likely to elect to study economics than males. University managers also supported a move away from economics to business as it supported their community engagement priorities. Regrettably the 'data suggests that when a university makes a decision to exit a subject area it tends to do so completely' (JRT 2014: 597) which makes it very difficult to resurrect a program if circumstances change.

The authors lament the loss of economic literacy as a result of the withdrawal of the subject from major parts of the higher education sector, as institutions have rationalized their offerings. Old universities preserved their disinterested intellectual enquiry while the new universities, if they offer economics at all, embody it in business programs (TRJ 2013: 60). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds then are largely unable

to participate in informed economics discussion and to understand and evaluate critical economic issues. The authors even speculate whether there is a case for governments subsidizing the study of economics in non-elite universities.

The Australian situation

Are the disturbing trends revealed for the UK also at work in Australia? Two detailed studies published by the Australian Academy of the Humanities as part of a 'Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia Project' provide us with excellent source material to begin the comparison (Dobson 2013; Turner & Brass 2014¹).

Over the period 2002-11 student numbers grew by 36 per cent, student load by 40 per cent and the size of the total academic workforce in Australia grew by 27 per cent. Non-research postgraduate enrolments increased by 44 per cent across the university sector. The humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) disciplines teach the majority of students in the Australian higher education system maintaining a share of around 65 per cent of all enrolments, and 63 per cent of student load (Turner & Brass 2014:12). The growth in student enrolments over the last decade has been fuelled by growth in international enrolments across the whole sector, and the area of most substantial growth has been in Management and Commerce (107 per cent). Over the period the Economics student load

¹ The report, published in October 2014, was co-funded by the Department of Industry, the Office of the Chief Scientist, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

(EFTSL) increased from 22,477 in 2002 to 28,826 in 2011 – an increase of 28.2 per cent (below the sector average growth) (Dobson 2013:24)².

The HASS sector is large and diverse—covering fields from economics, psychology, geography and demography to linguistics, archaeology, history, arts and media studies. It is sometimes separated into the Humanities and Creative Arts (HCA) and the Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences (SBE)³. Within the HASS, Management and Commerce had the largest share of enrolments in 2011 (26 per cent) followed by Society and Culture (21 per cent). Over the decade covered there has been substantial growth in disciplines ranging from the traditional humanities (Philosophy), to the more contemporary (International Relations) and to new interdisciplinary programmes (Media and Communications) (Turner & Brass 2014:2). However both reports note that the demand-driven system has resulted in the rationalisation of offerings in certain fields, the mergers of disciplinary units, such as schools and departments, and a reduction in the geographic spread of HASS programs across the nation. In particular there has been a contraction of disciplinary presence from the regional or non-metropolitan campuses to the metropolitan and Go8 universities. Certain disciplines—Anthropology, Political Science, Archaeology, Sociology, for instance—are now overwhelmingly concentrated in Go8

² Economics as a field has a disproportionate large amount of ‘service teaching’ and a disproportionate low percentage of female students.

³ Humanities and Creative Arts (HCA) comprises Built Environment and Design; Law and Legal Studies; Studies in Creative Arts and Writing; Language, Communication and Culture; History and Archaeology; and Philosophy and Religious Studies. Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences (SBE) comprises Education; Economics; Commerce, Management, Tourism and Services; Studies in Human Society; and Psychology and Cognitive Sciences.

universities⁴. Another trend has been that the number of majors available within the BA degree has declined as well as the number of ‘tagged’ degrees (i.e. Bachelor degrees named after a particular specialisation, such as a Bachelor of Economics).

The equitable distribution of HASS programmes across metropolitan and regional centres is an issue of key concern to Turner & Brass (2014). There is evidence that entry scores are dropping and numbers declining in HASS programmes in regional universities while enrolments in these fields of education are becoming increasingly concentrated in the metropolitan universities and the Group of Eight (Go8) universities, with consequent reductions in the range of opportunities available to those in regional Australia [see Table 1]. Responsibility for discipline offerings is largely left to individual universities or groups of universities to address, but the authors ask whether the education market is delivering what the nation needs? Subjects where the demand from the student market may not be high may still be of national, strategic, or academic importance:

It is in the area of course provision that some of the more intractable issues around the effect of a demand-driven system occur; the specific institutional logics which drive rationalisation are not always going to be in the national interest, nor indeed in the interest of particular disciplines or fields of education. The *Health of Australian Science* (2012) report, as well as the DASSH report, has raised concerns about

⁴ The Group of Eight universities is a coalition of Australian universities that comprises The Australian National University, Monash University, The University of Adelaide, The University of Melbourne, The University of New South Wales, The University of Sydney, The University of Queensland and The University of Western Australia. There is similarity here between the UK research-intensive ‘Sutton 13’ universities (Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St. Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York).

the importance of what have been called enabling disciplines—in STEM, the situation of mathematics is one example, and within HASS we could nominate, for example, History. Allowing the presence of such fields to decline to the point where it affects the national capacity is clearly not desirable. However, the demand-driven system does not encourage individual institutions to take responsibility for what is in the end a national capability (Turner & Brass 2014: 31).

The authors go on to state that there is a risk that if student choice continues to determine discipline offerings, HASS teaching would contract to the metropolitan universities, and perhaps even only to the Go8. There is evidence that in some universities there has been a gradual institutional disinvestment in HASS fields of education. In particular, regional universities are becoming more oriented towards offering training programmes targeted towards specific professions rather than the more generalist degrees (Turner & Brass 2014: 37).

Table 1: Types of Australian universities by Moodie Classification

ATN-like	Group of Eight	1960s–1970s	New generation	Regional
Curtin University	Australian National University	Deakin University	Australian Catholic University	Ballarat University[now Federation]
Queensland University of Technology	Monash University	Flinders University	Bond University	Central Queensland University
RMIT University	University of Adelaide	Griffith University	University of Canberra	Charles Darwin University
Swinburne University	University of Melbourne	La Trobe University	Edith Cowan University	James Cook University
University of South Australia	University of New South Wales	Macquarie University	University of Notre Dame	University of the Sunshine Coast
University of Technology, Sydney	University of Queensland	Murdoch University	Victoria University	Southern Cross University
	University of Sydney	University of Newcastle	University of Western Sydney	University of Tasmania
	University of Western Australia	University of Wollongong		University of New England
				University of Southern Queensland

Source: Developed by Gavin Moodie, http://www.academia.edu/310547/Types_of_Australian_universities reprinted in Turner & Brass 2014 Table A6.7.

Economics in Australia

Maxwell (2003) noted that between 1995 and 2000 six separate economics departments disappeared and in net terms between 60 and 70 economists left the university system. In more recent times these developments have escalated. Many Departments of Economics have been closed, merged or relocated, their staff made redundant while economics degrees and majors have been eliminated (Lodewijks & Stokes 2014)⁵.

In 2008 the Bradley Review recommended a more deregulated higher education system for Australia. This new 'demand-driven' entitlement system would allow the limit on the number of students that a university could admit to be removed or 'un-capped' from 2012⁶. More recent data shows us that the initial impact in Australia of the move to uncap university places has led to a drop in entry requirements in most courses, including economics, most notably in the non Go8 universities. Table 1 reflects the different impacts the uncapping had on the two tiers of universities in Australia. The Lodewijks & Stokes (2014) study reports widespread declining university admission standards in economics and commerce courses in the lower ATAR⁷ level universities.

⁵ The latest casualty is economics at the University of Canberra where the two professors near to retirement will only be replaced with one level B position.

⁶ As a lead-in to the removal of quotas on university courses the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) introduced transition arrangements in 2010 to allow universities to increase their numbers by increasing the level that universities could over-enrol by 10 per cent.

⁷ The ATAR is the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank. It is calculated for institutions to rank and select school leavers for admission to tertiary courses.

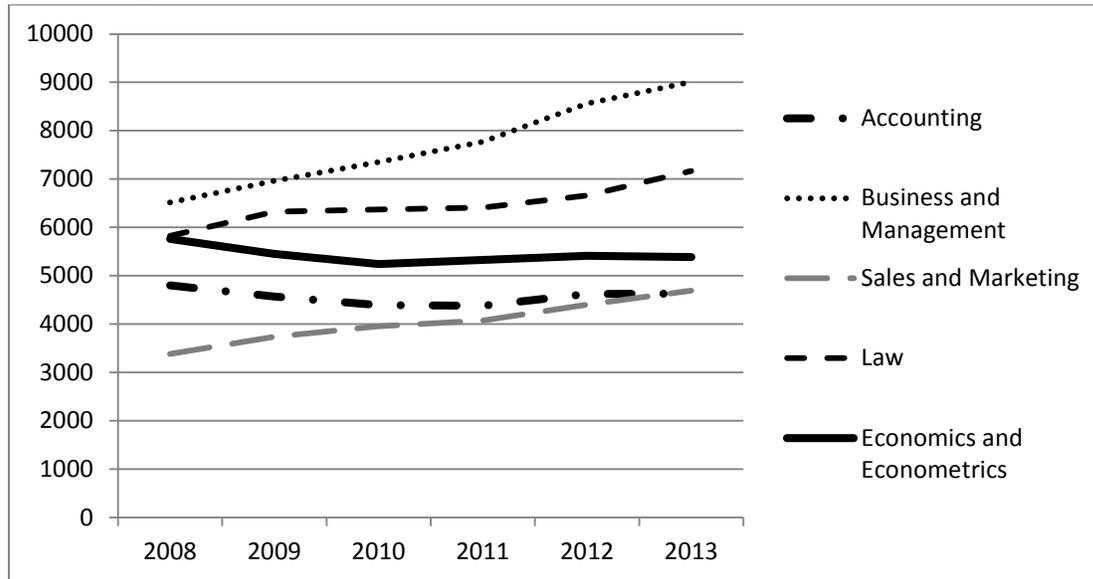
Table 1 Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) 2007 and 2014^a

University	2007 Arts	2007 Business/ Commerce	2014 Arts	2014 Business/ Commerce
Average for Go8	82.43	88.39	80.01	89.09
Average for non-Go8	70.78	72.87	64.04	65.09

a For 2007 the entry scores have been adjusted to an equivalent ATAR, using the Universities Admission Centre conversion table. Source: Lodewijks & Stokes 2014.

Despite the growth in student numbers overall, as a result of the uncapping of places, the number of students studying economics actually declined in Australia in the period 2008-2013. In the period 2008-2013 there was an overall growth in commencing domestic student numbers across all bachelor courses of 34 per cent. Business and management numbers rose 38 per cent, marketing and sales 39 per cent and law 23 per cent. At the same time the numbers of commencing economics students (including econometrics) declined almost 7 per cent from 5781 students to 5384 students. The fall in the number of students commencing accountancy by almost 4 per cent during the period could also suggest that commencing students are turning away from the more rigorous mathematically orientated courses to more descriptive and perceived easier options. Figure 1 shows the trends that have occurred since it was announced that there would be an uncapping of places.

Figure 1: Commencing domestic student numbers across various degrees in Australia, 2008-2013



Source: Australian Government Department of Education (various years), Selected Higher Education Statistics; Lodewijks & Stokes 2014.

The overall decline *in commencing students in economics along with the lower ATARs appear to be impacting on the non Go8 universities rather than the Go8 universities* (Lodewijks & Stokes 2014).

Evaluating Research Outcomes

Have the effects of the formal national research evaluations on universities in the UK been replicated in Australia? The HASS received 16 per cent of the nation's research income, contributed 44 per cent of the total number of Units of Evaluation in the 2012 'Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)' research assessment exercise, and produced 34 per cent of the research outputs in the university sector. However, there was significant variation in the distribution of research funding between the regions and the Go8

universities over the period surveyed. While the Go8 universities were awarded 65 per cent of ARC National Competitive Grants Programme (NCGP) funding for HASS over this period, regional universities only received 4 per cent. A large proportion of quality HASS research is taking place in the metropolitan universities, especially the Go8 (Turner & Brass 2014: 2).

Within HASS, Economics has been highly successful in attracting external research grants. Indeed at the two digit field of research classification level in terms of research income it is ranked fourth behind studies in human society, psychology and cognitive sciences, and education. Note, however, that these disciplines have far more full time equivalent staff than economics has – 249 per cent, 134 per cent and 279 per cent more staff respectively. There are only three research fields with less staff than economics. A comparison with Commerce, Management, Tourism and Services is telling. They have more than three times the number of staff than economics yet obtained twenty per cent less total research income⁸.

Economics was placed first in another category. Over the period 2002-13, 83 per cent of all the Australian Research Council National Competitive Grants given to Economics were awarded to Go8 institutions. This is the highest percentage of all 2-digit classifications. The next highest was Philosophy and Religious Studies with 76 per cent (Turner & Brass 2014:53).

We now move away from research grants to more broadly look at

⁸ Figures calculated from Table 3.2 in Turner & Brass 2014.

data from the two ERA audits (2010 and 2012), which assessed the quality of Australian university research against world standards⁹. The range of variation in HASS performance was wide: the strongest performer is History and Archaeology with 89.7 per cent of its 27 discipline units of evaluation (UoEs) (at four-digit level) rated at or above world standard and the weakest is Commerce, Management, Tourism and Services with 48.4 per cent of its 38 UoEs (at four-digit level) rated at or above world standard. Moreover, there was evidence of an increasing concentration of high performing discipline units of evaluation in the Go8. Outside the metropolitan areas, with exceptions, more discipline research outputs were rated below world standard (Turner & Brass 2014:63, 72).

In Economics the research field classifications are at the two digit level - 14 Economics - and at the four-digit level - 1401 Economic Theory, 1402 Applied Economics, 1403 Econometrics and 1499 Other Economics. Applied Economics is the dominant field in economics with 61 per cent of full time equivalent staff producing 70 per cent of all research outputs and generating 87 per cent of all research income. In ERA 2012 of the 45 economics units of evaluation 28 were ranked at or above world standard (62 per cent). All the Go8 UoE's were at world standard and above while seven of the nine regional UoE's were rated below world standard. The overall performance of the discipline – 62 per cent of UoE's at or above world standard - is quite poor. Among the HASS discipline this only better than Commerce, Management, Tourism and Services (48.4 per cent) and

⁹ Necker (2014) notes that high pressures to publish and to raise external research income can lead to unacceptable research practices. Encouragingly, this survey reveals that there is a broad consensus among professional economists about the norms that should guide researchers' behavior and relative to other disciplines, falsification and fabrication is a rare phenomenon in economics.

Education (50.6 per cent). For comparison purposes History and Archaeology achieved (89.7 per cent), Language, Communication and Culture (86.1 per cent), Philosophy and Religious Studies (83.3 per cent) - with Applied Ethics 100 per cent. Studies in Creative Arts and Writing, Studies in Human Society, Law and Legal Studies, Built Environment and Design and Psychology and Cognitive Sciences all achieved over 70 per cent (Turner & Brass 2014: 123).

These ERA 2012 Economics rankings are hard to fathom¹⁰. As poor as they are they are an improvement on ERA 2010. They appear out of line with research income rankings. Arguably they are out of line with a more objective assessment of research quality (Davidson 2013). It seems to suggest that the Go8's are far above the other universities in research outcomes¹¹ and there is a very long tail in the distribution¹². These findings provide the justification, if more was needed, to close down other economics departments and programs.

Evaluating Learning and Teaching Outcomes

The 'Group of 8' universities are well known for their high quality research outcomes but are not particularly noted for high quality teaching in economics. Research by Barrett & Milbourne (2012) on the relationship

¹⁰ Neri and Rodgers (2014) noted that previous research indicated that Australian economists published little high-quality international research in the 1980s and 1990s but that its quantum of high-quality economic research increased between 2001 and 2010.

¹¹ Neri and Rodgers (2014) study of top-tier economics journals found that only twelve universities accounted for over 92 per cent of the Australian publications.

¹² Note that high rankings of research quality in an institution do not necessarily coincide with a commitment to quality undergraduate education. The managerial preoccupation with grants and publications in high-ranked journals and the cross-subsidization of research from student fees may take the focus away from quality undergraduate education.

between research quality and teaching performance found that research performance exhibits a significant negative effect upon the student satisfaction with teaching. They conclude that “the competing nature of teaching and research outweighs the complementary nature; Undergraduate students possibly perceive inadequate time or interest devoted to them in research-intensive faculty environments” (Barrett & Milbourne 2012, p.76). This is supported by MyUniversity (2015) results for 2011 and 2012 (Table 2), based on Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) data, that shows that the Go8 universities performed worse in the category of ‘student satisfaction with good teaching’ in economics in Australia than the non-Go8 universities. Indeed, the new generation universities were ranked as the best providers of good teaching¹³. Overall it was two of the lowest ATAR universities, ACU and UWS that achieved the highest scores (86.1 and 79.8 respectively) in the ‘good teaching’ category.

As the higher ATAR universities accept more students this reduces the pool of students who are capable and interested in studying economics in the middle and lower ATAR universities. As the middle range ATAR universities allow more students to enrol, there are fewer students wanting to enrol in the lower ATAR universities. This pattern is reflected in the decline in enrolments in economics majors at the topped ranked ‘teaching’ universities, UWS and ACU. The impact of this trend resulted in the phasing out of the Bachelor of Economics Degree, Bachelor of Economics (Honours) and Bachelor of Economics/Law at UWS from the start of 2013. ACU is also facing challenges with their Bachelor of Arts and Economics course under

¹³ It should be noted that only three of the new generation universities had sufficient graduate responses to the questionnaire to achieve a score.

review and staff being required to justify the financial viability of the course compared to the large cohorts in business, nursing and education.

Having more students in the research 'elite' Go8 universities is likely to reduce the time for research at the universities that have the highest research outcomes. In addition, the need to cater for lower ability students will add to the burden for those staff. Neither of these outcomes seems best for economics teaching and research in universities.

Table 2: Course Experience Questionnaire Data for Universities in Australia (2011-2012 averages)

University	Teaching quality
Average for Go8 universities	59
Range of scores for Go8	48-70
Average for non-Go8 universities	67
Range of scores for non-Go8	42-86
Average for new generation universities	81
Range of scores for new generation universities	78-86

Source: Data derived from MyUniversity (2015).

Evaluating the Impact on Socio-economic Opportunity

One of the key recommendations of the Bradley Review (2008) was that 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level would be from low socio-economic status backgrounds by 2020. While this target is still to be achieved, the likelihood of it occurring in economics is remote. Most of the Go8 universities have low levels of enrolment of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. In 2013 the average enrolment of domestic low socio-economic status background students in undergraduate courses throughout Australia was 17.3 per cent of the cohort (DET 2013). The average number of domestic low socio-economic status background students in the Go8 universities was 10.2 percent, with none of the universities achieving the national average. In addition, the universities with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, Central Queensland University (51.1 per cent) and University of Southern Queensland (34.0 per cent) do not offer an economics major in the case of CQU and offers a business economics major in the case of USQ. However the numbers graduating in economics at USQ are low as there were not sufficient graduates completing the CEQ surveys to determine a ranking for teaching outcomes on the MyUniversity website.

This suggests that a continuation of this trend to focus on Go8 universities will also disadvantage students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. For example the two Go8 universities in Sydney have an average proportion of low SES students of 9.2 per cent. UWS, on the other

hand, which is based in a low SES area, has 24.9 per cent of their cohort from low SES backgrounds. A decline in economics in the low SES areas will significantly limit the opportunities for those who could benefit most from studying economics. The creation of 'elite' universities for economics will also stratify social inclusiveness and opportunity.

Conclusion

The findings of the two detailed studies published by the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2013 and 2014 show uncanny similarities between the UK and Australian situation. Obviously similar forces are at work in the high education sector. The findings present a challenge to economists to unravel, explain and possibly reverse. It might well be argued that the demand-driven system has led to some market failures with implications for the national interest. There is an increasing concentration of economics offerings in sandstone universities, thus limiting the opportunities of students in other universities from taking a full complement of economics courses. Is there a case for 'special privilege' or has the market simply selected the fittest to survive highlighting significant quality differences among institutions?

Could it also be the case that it is those institutions with small economics programs that have closed or are under threat and therefore the impact on the discipline will not be so significant? Dobson (2013) has ranked universities by discipline according to their Student Load in 2011. Thirty eight universities are listed offering enrolment in economics subjects.

The institution with the highest student load is surprisingly RMIT which has a large offshore economics program. The Go8 institutions are all in the top half of the list: Monash University (2), University of Queensland (3), University of New South Wales (4), University of Sydney (5), University of Melbourne (6), University of Adelaide (12), The Australian National University (13) and the University of Western Australia (14). However, Macquarie was ranked 7th, La Trobe 8th, University of Western Sydney 9th, Curtin 11th, Victoria 16th and Wollongong 17th. Of those six universities, with sizeable economics enrolments in 2011, five have been the subject of restructuring that has seriously down-sized its capacity to provide a full range of economics courses.

While there are some differences between the two countries with respect to economics, for example the increase in economics enrolment is far healthier in the UK, the similarities are startling. We ended the equivalent of our binary system in 1988 with the emergence of the Dawkins universities with the move from a two-tier sector with 19 universities and 46 colleges to a “unified” one with 36 public universities. We also had the pressure for vast enrolment increases and the imperative for social inclusion, with the Review of Higher Education in Australia (the Bradley Report) recommending, and the Australian Government agreeing, to a national target that by 2025, 40 per cent of all 25 to 34 year olds will hold a minimum bachelor’s degree qualification. They also set a target to have 20 per cent of undergraduate students enrolled in our universities from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds by the year 2020. As in the UK, the research assessment exercises, in Australia the ERA audits organized by

the Australian Research Council, appear to have played a similar role. Finally, our universities have also increased their 'autonomy at the operational level'. This is sometimes referred to as the corporatization of universities and increasing managerial (rather than a community of scholars) dominance of decision-making. We have had our fair share of 'financial imperatives', the 'realignment of resources', change management, restructuring and rationalization.

Economics in Australia also appears to be increasingly concentrated in elite universities. The disappointment is that there does not seem to be an agenda to object to what is happening or to develop strategies to turn back the tide. Many post-Dawkins universities, and even several established before then, are struggling to maintain viable economics programs. Those in top universities appear complacent and removed from the life and death struggles for the discipline in lower ranked institutions. Ultimately students, economics staff and society as a whole will suffer if economics becomes a course for only the 'elite' in society at the 'elite' universities.

References

Australian Government (2015) *MyUniversity*, Retrieved from <http://myuniversity.gov.au/>

Barrett, Gary and Ross Milbourne (2012) "Do Excellent Research Environments Produce Better Learning and Teaching Outcomes?" *Economic Record*, 88, June, pp. 70-77.

Bradley, Denise et al. (2008) *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*, Australian Government, Canberra.

Davidson, Sinclair (2013) "Excellence in Research for Australia: An Audit of the Applied Economics Rankings" *Agenda*, 20: 2, pp.5-20.

Department of Education and Training (2013) Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2013 Student Data, Retrieved from <https://education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2013-student-data>

Dobson, Ian R. (2013) *Mapping the Humanities and Social Sciences: Analysis of University Statistics 2002–2011*. Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra.

Fourcade, Marion, Ollion, Etienne and Yann Algan (2015). The Superiority of Economists. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 29:1 Winter pp.89-114.

Johnston, James , Alan Reeves and Steven Talbot (2014) "Has economics become an elite subject for elite UK universities?", *Oxford Review of Education*, 40:5, 590-609.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2014.959912>

See also London School of Economics and Political Science Blog, 11th November 2014:

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-growth-of-elitism-in-the-uks-higher-education-system-the-case-of-economics/>

Lodewijks, John and Tony Stokes (2014) "Is academic economics withering in Australia?" *Agenda* Vol.21 No.1 pp.69-88.

Maxwell, Philip (2003) "The Rise and Fall (?) of Economics in Australian Universities", *Economic Papers*, 22:1, pp.79-92.

Necker, Sarah (2014) "Scientific Misbehavior in Economics" *Research Policy*, 43, pp.1747-1759.

Neri, Frank and Joan Rodgers (2014) "The Contribution of Australian Academia to the World's Best Economics Research: 2001 to 2010". *Economic Record*. doi: 10.1111/1475-4932.12165

Talbot, Steve, Alan Reeves and James Johnston (2013) "Access to the system as a whole does not mean access to the whole system: The case of economics in Scottish higher education" *Scottish Affairs*, no. 83, spring pp. 42-70.

Talbot, Steve, Alan Reeves and James Johnston (2014) "Observations on the re-emergence of a binary system in UK universities for economics degree programmes", *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 18:1, 14-19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2013.861879>

Turner, Graeme and Kylie Brass (2014) *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia*. Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra.