
BOOK REVIEW

Matthew Jordan, *A Spirit of True Learning: the Jubilee History of the University of New England*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 2004, 307 pp, \$50.

Dr Matthew Jordan's book celebrates the 2004 golden jubilee anniversary of the University of New England (UNE). Jordan held a post-doctoral fellowship from 2001 while writing, which casts the author in an "outsider" role. Moreover, Vice-Chancellor Ingrid Moses comments the work is "unchecked and uncensored", unlike an official history, so underlining Jordan's broader approach. This book may be the forerunner of others, as the newer Australian Universities reach and celebrate their golden jubilees. Hence his approach may have interest, beyond its content, as a model suitable for other university histories.

The three parts into which the book's 14 Chapters are divided are Beginnings 1920-1954, Golden years 1954-1988 and Transformations 1988-2004. The framework echoes the origin, the growth after gaining autonomy from Sydney University in 1954 and then the contraction of the University under the Commonwealth funding changes introduced by Dworkin. The first section details well how the NSW State government, seeking to benefit its teacher training programmes, sought gain from giving the New England University College autonomy to pursue external teaching unacceptable to Sydney University. The second details the success in providing the wanted correspondence education, as well as supporting rural education through rural science and agricultural economics Faculties. A history of the Armidale Teachers College and later College of Advanced Education is included here. The final period, Transformations, deals with the amalgamation issue and its consequences. Transformations is a term of ambiguity, which some will read as decline, and possible fall. The best feature of this section is the comprehensive and insightful reportage, unavailable generally to now, of the financial crisis associated with this period. The author's presentation of how UNE's indebtedness rose to about \$ 26 million, mainly to the State Treasury Corporation, is equal to the best financial journalism found in the Australian Financial Review.

But despite this section being so well handled, the unimportance given to numbers relevant to the University's progress is the prime weakness of the book. Tables, graphs, appendixes are absent. Only an index and footnotes (without separate bibliography) are provided. A tabulation over the 50 years of the major office holders and their period of service, for example, would have helped fix for the reader the chronology of the Jubilee, especially as the frequency of turnover of Vice-Chancellors was marked around 1988. Similarly, tables of student and staff numbers, by Faculty, which quantified the growth, would have established what occurred and what had to be managed. Jordan, eschewing use of tables, makes searching through the text for such information onerous. Professors Fletcher and Sholl's informal history of the Physics Department shows what might have been done, even in just a few more pages. This failure to quantify growth leads to a lowered appreciation of the costs growth imposed. Jordan also pays too little attention to the costs of isolation in a rural university

The account of the role of external teaching in the golden period correctly gives prominence to Doctor (later Sir Robert) Madgwick and his Director of External Studies, Howard Sheath. Their concern was to ensure the market opportunity was seized. But if these two, supported by others, had the "knack" for such an exercise gained in war-time educational services, there were those in the academic ranks who remained unconvinced that going external was possible when gauged against their preconceptions of a university education. Jordan's account of Macquarie University's success with Science taught externally shows how UNE failed to command the entire field in external teaching, despite the innovative endeavours of the duo. Some would argue this artificial limitation on expansion led to UNE being eventually surpassed by a host of competitors, so accentuating the downturn after 1988. If this book's intent was to showcase past success, it also, in this instance, shows how Faculties, by their policies, could limit, in the long run, University success.

An interesting question is whether Jordan is subscribing to a superman theory of History with his emphasis on Madgwick's vision of regional and adult-orientated education, delivered by correspondence, as being crucial to UNE's success. If so the book may not be so helpful to those

who have to manage the University's future. Where will they find their "superman" among the managers of today's tertiary education providers whose main concern seems to be to turn the constraint of finance into the altogether different major aim of getting a market justifiable rate of return on assets (with, of course, managerial bonuses) and top credit ratings. The book does not explore the details of the Council's Selection Committee operation, either in terms of the Parliamentary Act nor of its procedures: it would have been of interest, in terms of the quick succession of vice-chancellors after Gates, to learn what decisions drove those appointments. The consequences of this succession of short-stay leaders and whether this added to the marginalisation of the university deserves greater analysis. For the problem now is how to cope with policy changes and political appointees made by both State and Federal Governments, which can introduce, not the super person, but the ideologue capable of subverting the institution. This part of the puzzle of transformations in UNE remains to be answered. This book's version of the past "vision splendid" is therefore its main justification.

Omissions might be pursued, but the two following do not distract from the overall marshalling of the Jubilee period. Those who have chuckled over Bob Barnard's novel of Armidale town and gown life, "Death of an Old Goat", or admired Thomas Kennelly's evocation of the New England landscape in parts of "The Survivor" might regret the exclusion of literature depicting UNE from mention. The theme of philanthropy, shown as important in the early period, is not continued, which means the issue of the future attraction of endowment funds by having appropriate legal and financial arrangements, rather than the current ad hoc ones, is left unconsidered.

This book will appeal to former staff and students. Higher education academics and administrators will find it a sound account of the external model as conceived in New England, possibly even having case study potential in other directions as well. Though no doubt some will dispute certain omissions of persons and events, this is a modest price to pay for a readable, insightful and useful account of one Australian university's jubilee history.

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