
The International Journal of the First Year in Higher
Education

ISSN: 1838-2959

Volume 5, Issue 1, pp. 1-8

March 2014

Feature

In conversation with: Professor Richard James

John Clarke and Karen Nelson

Abstract

In 2011, Richard James wrote in the Foreword to Nelson, Clarke, Kift, and Creagh's (2012) monograph on Australasian literature on the First Year Experience that:

The trend towards universal participation will usher in dramatic changes in the character of the first year in higher education. ... (p. iii)

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Please cite this article as:

Clarke, J. & Nelson, K. (2014). In conversation with: Professor Richard James. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 5(1), 1-8. doi: 10.5204/intjfyhe.v5i1.222

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Feature interview— biography¹

Professor Richard James

Professor Richard James is Pro Vice-Chancellor (Equity and Student Engagement) and a Professor of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne. Since 2006, he has been the Director of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, a leading centre for policy research in higher education.

Richard has wide-ranging research interests in higher education that centre on the quality of the student experience. His research program spans access and equity, the transition to university, student finances, student engagement, quality assurance and academic standards. He has published widely on the effects of social class on higher education aspirations and participation. With colleagues at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, he has conducted national studies of the first year experience since the mid-1990s.

Much of this research has been related to policy development. Richard has led significant national studies of equity and student finances for Universities Australia that were influential in the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education.



He is a Fellow of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders and a member of the inaugural Higher Education Standards Panel, the national body that sets standards for the regulation of universities and other higher education providers. Richard is a regular public commentator on higher education policy. In 2013, *The Australian* (Australia's national newspaper) ranked him at number 22 in its list of the 50 most influential thinkers in Australian higher education.

¹ The biography and photograph are used with the kind permission of Professor James.

Introduction

In 2011, Richard James wrote in the *Foreword* to Nelson, Clarke, Kift, and Creagh's (2012) monograph on Australasian literature on the First Year Experience that

The trend towards universal participation will usher in dramatic changes in the character of the first year in higher education. ... Clearly, the pathways into higher education will diversify. ... Certainly, there will be more students with lower levels of academic preparedness for higher education ... greater diversity in student motives and expectations and the patterns of student participation in the day-to-day life of universities. (p. iii)

In an interview at the University of Melbourne, Australia on the 11th of July 2013 between Richard James and John Clarke, Co-editor of the *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, these and related issues were explored.² The interview picks up where the *Foreword* left off: focussing on universal participation.

² The interview was transcribed and analysed by John Clarke and the Editor-in-chief of the journal, Karen Nelson. The structure and sequence in the final product does not reflect the time order of the original transcript. Rather, material has been grouped into a discussion of substantive issues. The product presented here has been approved by Richard James as a fair and genuine reflection of the original interview and apart from the headings, the words are his.

But first, to contextualise the Australian situation, some thoughts on the impact of international trends ...

What goes on in Australian higher education is very much determined these days by the nature of the international student market. Whenever we think about selection, recruitment, admissions, orientation, first year programs, we're also thinking about international students. Now, there's much nervousness in the sector about the international student demand and how it might fluctuate, or drop into the future.

It's almost fair to say that the biggest trend of consequence to Australian higher education is the growing quality of higher education in Asia, the willingness of the historical Asian markets for Australia to look elsewhere in the world. So there's a repositioning of Australia in the South-East Asian region, vis-à-vis, potential for student recruitment. Australian recruiters are now looking to South America, for example. One of the international trends that will affect our thinking in Australia about undergraduate education and the first year experience, will be where the student flows are originating.

A related trend is university rankings. Many people can't get excited about university rankings, but in fact they underpin important student flows. Australian students might not think much about university rankings, but our international students certainly do so.

The third most obvious international trend is to do with the technology and the possibilities for online learning.

And now, some thoughts on universal participation...

We've been through the very early stages of understanding the consequences of a demand-driven system that uncaps the volume of undergraduate places. It has certainly changed the character of admissions to higher education dramatically, hence the character of first year programs and the first year experience, and the nature of students who are coming into higher education. I believe governments of either persuasion are going to be inclined to seriously think about calming the growth in undergraduate places. The present government³ is interested not only in what the demand driven system is costing, but also in the perceptions about the lack of preparedness in incoming students. There are perceptions that universities are taking in students who aren't ready for higher education—even though there are many myths in this regard.

Putting aside the current or future political settings, we know that ultimately we're on an inexorable path to greater participation in higher education. That is simply going to happen. It's going to happen through social forces as much as through the policy settings. I mean, more people these days expect their children to go on to tertiary education. The evidence is clear. More people realise that their prospects in life

are enhanced by tertiary education. So you're going to see a continuing demand for participation in different forms of tertiary education, and not merely at the point of leaving school, hence my point about pathways.

You can envisage a future higher education sector in which citizens engage and disengage, dip in and dip out of higher education at different points in their lives, at different points in their careers. That's not to say that there still won't be a large batch participating post year 12, of course there will be. But you'll see, I believe, and we already see, more gap years, more delayed entry, more repeated entry, people coming back for second degrees and so on, so that participation is going to be more dynamic in higher education, and universities will have to learn how to be responsive to this.

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The interest and demand for MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) is very exciting, because it

shows that there is demand for a different form of participation in tertiary education, a demand for what you might call a more *fragmented participation* in higher education. If literally millions of people around the world are prepared to sign on for a MOOC, or MOOCs, when they're not getting a serious credential for it, this says something about the sea-change in how people view ongoing education or lifelong learning.

Without doubt the world of higher education has changed dramatically and will continue changing, and it's all about universal participation, it's about most citizens at some point in their lives

³ In July 2013 (the time of this interview) the Australian government was led by the Australian Labor Party. As of September 2013 the Prime Minister is Tony Abbott, the leader of the Coalition and the Liberal Party of Australia, after the Coalition defeated the Australian Labor Party at the 2013 federal election.

undertaking tertiary education. What kind of structure in a tertiary sector can deliver this? What kind of fee arrangements are able to fund it? What kind of standards and quality assurance do we have to ensure that students are protected and that communities are protected?

On standards and tertiary systems...

The political environment that we see in Australia at the moment is driven by questions such as: Who has a right to go to university? Who should pay for this? How do we assure standards that were once protected in the elite era by the academy? In other words, universities looked after the standards themselves. Standards now are everyone's business. Now you have a government that's deeply interested in standards, a government sending hints of concerns about school-leavers with lower [i.e. inferior] tertiary entry scores going into higher education.

Standards now are everyone's business

Once it would have been viewed as outrageous for a government to get involved in what is ultimately a university selection matter, but that's the changing climate. Along the way, students are more demographically diverse than ever before, and they have quite different motives for being at university. They're not like the students of the past. Paid work, while perhaps a necessity for some, is now simply part of how you live your life as a uni student. When you're a young person and you're going to university, you also work and have a social life. So the modes of student participation are certainly changing, partly technology-driven, but also partly as a result of a different socio-cultural environment.

Soon we'll see much debate in Australia about the structure of our tertiary system. The character of the tertiary system in Australia is very much determined by the national policy settings and is quite a regulated sector. The question for Australia is: How do we create a more diverse set of institutions with consequently more diverse services and possibilities for students? The answer is by getting the policy settings right. I think at the moment they're not achieving quite what we'd want. To be more concrete, it seems logical for Australia to have a college-like system like the US—to have more liberal arts teaching colleges if you like.

As soon as you start talking about a differentiated system in Australia, the idea of 'teaching-only universities' quickly pops up and then people get anxious. The current Higher Education Standards Framework defines the character of the higher education sector. It defines who can play what game, and thus how funding flows. We have to have a tough discussion about how we create a more differentiated sector.

The question really will be: What is a university in Australia? What defines it? At the moment it's defined by research. Is it possible for us to imagine a different definition of university? Is it possible to start introducing other descriptors that have status and meaning that mightn't include university?

There's a place in Australia for some outstanding, probably small, liberal arts-like colleges that teach undergraduate programs and do them stunningly well. ... There's lots of permutations possible here. For example, could you imagine an existing university, if one had the will, setting up an

undergraduate college within its larger university structure, and nurturing talent within a smaller room, if you like, of the greater university.

On credentials and tertiary systems ...

At the moment, for credential purposes, you need to go to university. You do this more or less straight after school, you do three or four years and you get a credential that gives you professional registration and/or credibility in the workplace. The higher education enterprise in a sense is underpinned by the credentialing function of universities. They can award degrees. It's based on a community-wide acceptance that a university degree, the testamur, means something, that it's a ticket to life and career.

Imagine a future, though, in which lots of citizens stop buying into that model. Imagine a future in which many citizens start to generate complicated CVs which have mixes of education and work. They've done a MOOC here, they've done a short course there — and they've assembled a more eclectic, more amorphous set of 'qualifications' that are tradeable in the marketplace. Now, if this were to happen, universities begin to lose an important element in their monopoly.

Let's not forget that for as long as anyone can remember, employers have complained about university graduates not being ready for the workplace. If employers increasingly recruit people with different kinds of CVs or portfolios and start looking less for the bachelors degree as the litmus test and instead look more closely at educational experiences of other kinds then a major shift will be underway.

The consequence for universities is they need to be smarter about how they educate students and shape the skills of graduates. They have to stand on their record. Universities will need to do more to convince communities that going to university, regardless of field of study, actually generates useful skills.

Many conceptions of first year are of bright-eyed, bushy-tailed students arriving batch-like on the first day. Well that's still going to happen, of course, but perhaps not as much as people imagine. How we respond to what I'll call a *non-batch-like* participation model, one in which students might wish to commence at different times and engage at different times is a major challenge. How will we respond to a more

fragmented form of participation?

Universities are not particularly well-structured and equipped for delivering short programs. They're mainly set up around long-haul participation. But for

the student, *long-haul* is costly in fees, and it's costly in income foregone, so citizens make quite rational judgements in the main part about whether or not a degree is worth it. I think we have to do more to change our business models in relation to our degree programs.

In the past, universities were repositories of knowledge. You literally had to physically attend a university to get access to knowledge, because it was in books and in the heads of the people lecturing. And that knowledge, and how it was applied to professions and careers, was relatively stable compared to the current scenario.

How will we respond to a more fragmented form of participation?

Consider how massively this has changed. Universities no longer have a monopoly on knowledge generation and knowledge storage. If you want to learn something these days there's many other ways of doing so, and the nature of work and the relationship between knowledge and work has changed dramatically. Many professions experience dramatic knowledge churn in which knowledge rapidly goes out of date because of changing practices, norms and understandings.

There's also the diversification of careers and professions into more specialised roles. In short: the relationship between universities, knowledge and work was once much simpler than it is now. Universities would be negligent to imagine that they can go on with practices that were developed 100, 150

years ago. But they continue to do so! As a simple example, perhaps an extreme one, if you go into most university in Australia in the final weeks of semester you're very likely to see rows of students in large exam halls or rooms sitting at desks undertaking invigilated examinations. This looks like something out of the 19th Century.

Some thoughts on what this all means for the first year experience...

Perhaps there was a time when many academics thought the university was for them, that the university served academics

and that the students were lucky to be there and were to be tolerated— as long as they kept out of the way! There's been a massive shift in thinking, of course, a shift towards seeing education as one of the primary core businesses of a university, regardless of whether it's a research intensive university or not; that students are part of the university, that the university's future hinges greatly on what kind of skills and knowledge those students will take out into their lives and careers and that the university's future

depends on those students being advocates for the university.

When you realise that students are actually quite precious, raw material for the core business, then you start considering “My goodness, how we influence them when they get here, how we acculturate, how we set new norms and how we raise expectations, all of this is squarely at the heart of what the university stands for”.

... first year is a pivotal time in which to help students not only adjust academically and socially, but also begin to see themselves as co-generators of knowledge.

Some people may think that it's what you do in final year that counts. No, no, no! In fact, it's the foundations built right from the start that lead to what a student is able to achieve in final year. I'm not suggesting that the rest of the experience isn't important of course, but the first year is a pivotal time in which to help students not only adjust academically and socially, but also begin to see themselves as co-generators of knowledge. This is a really important outcome, a really vital and precious outcome.

I'm not underestimating the value and importance of carefully monitoring graduate outcomes and careful assessment of students who are near graduation. All of this is very important of course, but the pedagogical importance of the first year is what I'm stressing. To put this in very instrumental terms, first year is where we know we have the most attrition, so in very simple terms, first year is where something has to be done.

And finally ...

The first year continues to be a really important sort of litmus test for the well-being of our universities. It's where we make complex decisions about who ought to be admitted. It's where we make the initial steps towards ensuring students' success.

References

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