

THE CASE FOR A UNIVERSITY IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Introduction

The student who seeks to pursue post-school education in Australia is presented with a three-fold choice:

- technical and further education; or
- advanced education; or
- university education.

With the exception of the Northern Territory, the separate political entities of Australia are able to offer their residents access to all three possibilities. The Northern Territory alone has no university.

In March 1980, the Northern Territory Government announced its intention to establish the first university in the Northern Territory. In doing so, the Government was not motivated by a wish to establish a monument to progress achieved, but rather by the desire to provide the Territory with an agent which is essential to its continuing development and, consequently, to the overall development of Australia.

What is a University?

The case for the university depends upon the answer to the question: What is a university?

The concept of university has evolved from the time of Socrates to the present day. Early developments which have influenced the modern university include: the concern of the ancient Greeks with systematic mental training; the Roman collegia or guilds which promoted business and craft and which fostered the concept of group support and loyalty; the long lasting influence of the Christian Church from which universities gained many ideas about structure and ritual practices as well as a concept of institutional autonomy; the emphasis at universities in medieval times on law, medicine and theology, the beginnings of endowments and of financial support from city and state; and the emergence of a strong Faculty of Arts at the University of Oxford. This liberal arts form and tradition, in which Doctors of Theology taught the "seven liberal arts" of grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music was predominant at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Paris.

Successive centuries saw many changes in academic powers and in various styles of governance among European universities. During the 1800s the industrial revolution, urbanization, and secularization brought about the formation of new attitudes and behaviours, one of which was a growing interest in rational and scientific explanation. German universities by 1800 had developed new ideas about

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the nature and purpose of universities, placing emphasis on research and scholarship in all fields and on academic freedom for the professoriate.

In the last hundred years, universities have had to respond to the increasing technological needs of society and to the close consideration of manpower needs and the part which they — the universities — can and should play in meeting those needs.

Since 1945, two phenomena have emerged in the further development of universities internationally:

- an increasing demand for university education with a corresponding increase in the number of universities; in 1945 Australia had six universities — one in each of the state capitals — and two university colleges (Armidale and Canberra); today there are nineteen; and

- an increasing criticism and demand for greater responsiveness and accountability.

It was with regard to the second of these — the increasing criticism — that in November 1979, the Senate of the University of Alberta having become aware of the

serious questionings and concerns on the part of certain members of the University community, faculty, students, and administration alike, of certain members of the government, and of certain members of the public at large, regarding not only the functions but also the identification of the very nature and purpose or purposes of universities in general as well as of the University of Alberta in particular,

resolved to establish a Commission to inquire into *the nature, purpose or purposes, and function of a University in general and of the University of Alberta in particular.*

The Commission's report was published in April 1982. The members of the Commission agreed that a university had four main functions:

- the discovery of knowledge
- the transmission of knowledge
- the preservation of knowledge
- service to society.

In proposing the first university in the Northern Territory, the Government of the Territory is seeking to establish an institution which will, ultimately, provide all four functions in the only politically distinct area in Australia which now has no such institution.

The Case For

The case for the establishment of a university in the Northern Territory must be evaluated in the context of the older Australian universities of Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Tasmania, Western Australia and Queensland, rather than the new group of post-Second World War institutions. The University of the Northern Territory would rightfully be regarded as a "first phase" university, providing an initial institution in an area hitherto unserved, not "second phase", like the second and third universities in capital cities, nor "third phase", like those regional institutions located outside capital cities but within states already having at least one university. The University of the Northern Territory will fill a vacuum, not supplement an existing provision.

It could be argued that the accidents of history have denied the Territory that provision which it could have assumed to be its right by equity and natural justice. A small population and an education system operated by South Australia meant that no official consideration was given to tertiary education provision within the Territory until the late 1960s. Local pressure for a university emerged even before South Australia ceded responsibility for education in the Northern Territory. A strong local advocacy built up precisely at the time that university expansion nationally first felt the constraints of economic deceleration. The request was countered by a requirement of the Commonwealth Department of Education, then responsible for education in the Territory, that the Darwin Community College should be seen to prove itself first, even though the college was not providing (nor was it designed to provide) the leadership and enterprise characteristic of a university. The local pressure for a university was gathering intensity again in 1974 when the destruction of Darwin deferred this proposal for five years. When the concept was revived by the NT Treasurer at the Fourth North Australia Development Seminar in Broome in 1979 it was well received by representatives of Australia's three northern States.

A review of the arguments developed in 1972 and 1974 in support of a Northern Territory university suggests that the prime motivation at that time was that of ensuring that undergraduate teaching would be available locally. While this was both understandable and defensible it paid insufficient regard to the wider purposes and broader implications of a university.

The major components in the case for a university in the Northern Territory are:

- *The growth rate of the population with a corresponding increase in the level of needs and expectations in the community*

The following table — based on information supplied by the Australian Bureau of Statistics — shows

that in the period since 1976 the Northern Territory has been the fastest growing area in Australia:

State/ Territory	1971 Popn.	1976 Popn.	% Increase	1981 Popn.	% Increase
NSW	4725.5	4595.6	5.0	5127.7	3.3
VIC.	3601.4	3810.4	5.8	3832.1	0.6
QLD.	1851.5	2092.4	13.0	2294.5	9.7
S.A.	1200.1	1274.1	6.2	1284.8	0.8
W.A.	1053.8	1178.3	11.8	1273.4	8.1
TAS.	398.1	412.3	3.6	419.0	1.6
N.T.	86.8	100.3	15.6	123.3	22.9
A.C.T.	150.1	205.7	37.0	221.6	7.7
TOTAL:	13067.3	14033.1	7.4	14574.5	3.9

In advancing the cause of the university, the Northern Territory Government has been responding to the rising level of expectation on the part of Territorians. Increasingly, people who identify themselves with the Northern Territory and see their futures here demand the services which are available to all other Australians. Prominent among those services is a State university. The Northern Territory has no such institution nor is there one situated closer than 2000 km by air from Darwin or 1300 km by air from Alice Springs. The Universities of Denpasar and Singapore — 1000 km and 2000 km by air, respectively, from Darwin — are as close in journey time to Darwin as any of the universities in Australia, all of which are located in that half of the country south of an arc from Townsville to Perth. North of that arc lies a vast area with special needs and interests and a growing population, an area where there is no university.

- *The special needs and opportunities for research*

In its final report, the Commission established by the University of Alberta states:

It is clear that what distinguishes a university from any other institute of post secondary education is its commitment to research.

The encouragement and support of research is central to the life and quality of any university, and to its reputation in the community. High quality staff cannot be attracted without the opportunity to undertake research. Research students, too, provide the next generation of academic staff and it is vital that a sufficient number be trained with a special interest in tropical Australia and the region. The nineteen existing universities in Australia provide a research base for the regions in which they are located and it is worth noting, all are also currently undertaking research in the Northern Territory (further details are supplied in *A Northern Territory Research Register* produced by the NT University Planning Authority). The Northern Territory has no such demonstrable base. (The North Australia Research Unit of the Australian National University has priorities in conforming with the ANU Act and is not an agency of the Northern Territory in which it is located.)

The opportunities for research in the Northern Territory are extensive; the need for research is urgent. Tropical Australia represents one-third of the land mass and 70 per cent of its territorial waters. The future of Australia is bound up in no small measure with this area. The resolution of its range of social, economic and environmental issues is of critical importance to the nation as a whole and the region beyond. Many of Australia's crucial questions are being confronted in the North. Most of them demand competent academic research.

Present activities overall, however, are fragmented and uncoordinated, deriving from special interests of university researchers or specific needs of private enterprise or public bodies. Such fragmented activities, however, result in little benefit accruing to the Territory. Rather is the Territory used as the source of raw material to be extracted and exported for processing and use elsewhere. While in no way wishing to inhibit the activities of other institutions, the University of the Northern Territory will be able itself to undertake research and co-operate with existing institutions to ensure the maximum useful dissemination of research findings of consequence to the Territory and its region.

• *The stage of development of post-school education in the Territory*

Whereas all other political units of Australia have provision for a three-tiered structure in post-school education (TAFE, advanced, university), the Territory provides only the lower two tiers — TAFE and advanced. More and more Territory students are enrolling in universities interstate because there is no provision for them within the Territory. Although the Darwin Community College currently offers some undergraduate and postgraduate Advanced Education courses, these do not meet the needs of all potential students nor can any expansion of course offerings at that institution substitute for a university.

• *The inability of institutions elsewhere in Australia to provide adequate numbers of suitably qualified persons who are willing to take up employment in the Northern Territory*

Any region which does not offer a complete system of education, i.e. from pre-school and primary schooling to university, is disadvantaged in two ways:

- the region loses the more able students who, quite naturally, seek qualifications and subsequent employment elsewhere; and
- the region is unable to attract a sufficient number of suitably qualified people to meet its requirements.

• *The special needs of Aborigines within the N.T.*

Existing universities offer little to Aborigines who

comprise more than one quarter of the Northern Territory population. Even when provision is made, few Territory Aborigines respond because of their unwillingness to travel away from their home base for any length of time. The School of Australian Linguistics and the Bilingual Section of the NT Department of Education are already undertaking research at a high level; Batchelor College is moving towards UG2 courses for aboriginal teachers; the Task Force at the Darwin Community College is preparing Aborigines to university-entrance level; and the Alice Springs Community College is beginning to work on appropriate technology for aboriginal communities. All of these endeavours, with others in the creative and applied arts, philosophy, anthropology, history and sociology, could usefully be co-ordinated through a University Centre for Aboriginal Studies. Research would contribute to teaching programmes in the university both for aborigines and about Aborigines. While there is no university this urgent need remains unmet.

• *The lead time required for a university to come to full maturity*

There is an inescapable period required for a university to establish its goals, develop its policy-making procedures, develop lines of communication, refine the academic and administrative decision-making processes, establish soundly-based research and teaching programmes — all of which are required before a university can genuinely be said to be producing graduates in sufficient number and quality for them to have a significant impact on their chosen professions and the community in which they live. Those who argue that the Territory will need a university in twenty years time are, in essence, arguing that a start should be made now.

• *The Commonwealth Government's policies on decentralisation*

From the time of the first abortive attempts to establish a European presence in the North to the present day, first the British Government and then the South Australian and the Commonwealth Governments have indicated their belief in the need to settle and develop Northern Australia with a stable and productive population. The rebuilding of Darwin after Cyclone Tracy, the movement towards statehood, and the decision to build a railway from Alice Springs to Darwin are clear indicators of the Commonwealth Government's continuing commitment to this policy. The establishment of the University of the Northern Territory will complete the educational spectrum which should be available to the people of the North and thus become another factor in the development and stabilising of the Territory.

Unacceptable options

Suggestions have been made that alternative solutions should be sought rather than a Territory university. These include:

- (a) the recruitment of high-level manpower from other states,
- (b) the introduction of further supplementary allowances to Northern Territory students enrolling at existing universities,
- (c) the further expansion of the Darwin Community College,
- (d) the extension to the Northern Territory of external studies programmes by universities interstate,
- (e) the creation in the Northern Territory of a university college subordinate to an established university located elsewhere in Australia.

Briefly, the arguments against these options are:

(a) The Territory cannot continue to develop on the basis of "expatriate experts". In any case, despite apparent oversupply nationally, few of the best can be attracted. Of those who are, many have little empathy with the Territory. Few put down roots.

(b) Subsidising Territory residents to attend institutions interstate would perpetuate the Territory's disadvantage compared to all other states where the bulk of students attend universities within their home state. Such a system would do nothing to meet the NT Government's wish to provide facilities which will assist in stabilising the population, encouraging a local identity and contributing to Territory development. Neither would it contribute in any other way to meeting the Territory's research needs or regional involvement, or to raising the educational levels and expectations of the Territory.

(c) When it was conceived, the Darwin Community College was seen as an appropriate development in post-school education in the Territory until such time as a university was established. An extended College would not be acceptable to those students who have the ability and ambition to pursue university studies, nor would it provide that base of research and scholarship which is essential for the wellbeing and prosperity of the Northern Territory. The Community College cannot be admitted to the international fraternity of universities. An expanded Community College could not be expected to attract sufficient staff or students of the highest quality, nor would it be effective in realising the Northern Territory Government's urgent wish to stabilise a young and mobile population. The Community College, however, will continue to have an important part to play in the overall provision of post-school education and training and the university should have a close relationship with it.

(d) While the University of the Northern Territory would wish to link into external study units and courses originating interstate, these cannot of themselves meet the Territory's need. Carefully monitored and supplemented by locally-produced material, such external study provisions have a part

to play but cannot substitute for a Territory-based university.

(e) A university college is a transitional device in which a new institution is protected and supported by the reputation and experience of the parent university. In Australia the usual pattern has been for such colleges to begin as outposts of existing universities, with staff appointed by the parent university teaching courses of the parent university. The establishment of such a university college in the Northern Territory could lead to substantial difficulties deriving from distance and the interposing of political boundaries between the college and its parent university.

To overcome these disadvantages, the Northern Territory Government has proposed that the new institution — whether it be a free-standing university or a university college — should enter into a system of multiple association with a number of existing Australian universities. Under this concept, for the early years of the new institution, representatives of the associated bodies would participate as full members at all levels of governance, overseeing academic standards, providing expert advice and assistance wherever necessary and making it possible for Territory students to complete their studies in disciplines which have not been fully developed at the University of the Northern Territory.

Consequential effects of a lack of a university

The bulk of Australian students attend universities in their own States and both then and thereafter remain close to their homes. (For example, of 1,468 members of Convocation of James Cook University, 1,214 are in Queensland, and of these, 950 are in Townsville and North Queensland). This is denied at present to students in the Northern Territory. As a consequence, not only students but also their families leave the Territory at the time at which they seek entry to a university, or at the end of Year 10 or Year 11 in high school (in order to seek entry to a university as permanent residents of a State), or even as far back as Years 7 or 8, to follow a complete high school course interstate. A corollary to this is that many families will not come to the Territory if their children are approaching the age for secondary or tertiary education. This locks the Northern Territory into a cycle: because there is no university, people leave or will not come; and because people leave or do not come, the projected growth rate of the number of potential students (assuming present factors continue) is depressed to a point where a university is difficult to justify on a simple basis of demography.

The movement of people in this way has a cumulative unsettling effect and reinforces the concept that the Territory is essentially a transit camp, "a first-rate place for second-rate people". So long as the Territory is without a university it will lack an important contribution to permanent residence (in itself an

important supporter of national policies of decentralisation), and will be unable to begin the processes — universal elsewhere — of training most of its professional and scholastic leaders in the community with which they identify, and of undertaking research which is essential to the continuing development of the region.

The twentieth university in Australia or the first university in the Northern Territory?

To date, the reaction of the Commonwealth Government has been that funding for a University in the Northern Territory will not be provided in the 1982/84 triennium. The basic reasons for this decision are:

- that the nineteen existing universities are able to provide sufficient places for Territory students;
- that a Territory university would be dangerously small in student numbers for many years to come (even though a projected enrolment of 2,000 by 1995 has not been seriously disputed by the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission).

Since 1974 (and the introduction of full Commonwealth funding for universities) there has been a growing tendency to talk of universities as if they were solely national institutions (even though, with the exception of A.N.U., they were established by State legislation). In that they contribute to the national development and in that students from any part of Australia may apply for admission to any university, they are national institutions. However, that must not be allowed to conceal the fact that 95% of all Australian students are enrolled at a university within their home state, nor the fact that 75% of all students are enrolled at a university within 40 km of their home (not term) residence. Thus while universities — like schools — do contribute to the national development, they obviously function primarily as agents for development within the states wherein they have been established.

It is trite but true to say that national circumstances with respect to university places do not solve the needs of all potential students from the Territory, nor do they supply the Territory with the benefits of the other functions provided elsewhere in Australia by universities.

Demography, too, is a weak counter-argument. The first colony — New South Wales — was established in Australia in 1788, and granted self-governing status in 1842. Eight years later, the first university in Australia was established in Sydney. At that time Sydney had a population of some 50,000. The university commenced with a Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and three professors, and an initial enrolment of 24 students. The growth rate of the new university was slow; twenty-five years after its foundation, the university had a total undergraduate enrolment of only 58. By 1939 (i.e. almost ninety years after its establishment) the university had a

total enrolment of about 4,000. Today the university enrolls over 17,000 students and has established a national and international reputation for research and scholarship. Those who decried the founding of a small, colonial institution have been proved wrong.

The University of Melbourne was founded in 1853 and declared open officially in 1855 (the year in which the Port Phillip district was declared a separate colony). Teaching in Arts, Science and Engineering began in 1860. Schools of Law and Medicine were established in 1857 and 1862 respectively. The Conservatorium of Music was established in 1895. Between 1904 and 1924 further schools were established — Dental Science, Agricultural Science, Veterinary Science, Education, Architecture, Commerce.

At its inception, the University of Melbourne had an enrolment of 16 students. As with the University of Sydney, growth was slow but by 1939 enrolments had reached 4,000. In 1981 (i.e. some 130 years after its establishment) the University of Melbourne had an enrolment of 16,000 engaged in a wide range of research and academic pursuits. Again, as with the University of Sydney, it has established a national and international reputation (as witnessed by the fact that almost 1,000 members of the student body come from overseas).

More recently, the University of New England opened in 1939 as a college of the University of Sydney with an enrolment of 24 students which had risen to 239 in 1954 when the institution became autonomous. James Cook University opened in 1961 as a college of the University of Queensland with an enrolment of 92 full-time and 88 part-time students, and has developed into an institution drawing from and catering for North Queensland.

In its report on the proposal to establish a University in the Northern Territory, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission made the following statement on projected enrolments:

On the basis of existing enrolment patterns, the potential growth of the Darwin region, and its own assessment of the extent to which the population would participate in university education, the Commission has concluded that the enrolment estimates contained in the proposal, while not unreasonable, are somewhat optimistic.

Projected enrolment levels at the proposed university, selected years, 1982 to 1995

Year	Commission Estimates	Northern Territory Proposal
1982	600- 850	700
1985	750-1,150	1,100
1988	850-1,650	1,300
1991	1,050-2,000	1,650
1995	1,200-2,450	2,200

The Northern Territory Government believes that the "not unreasonable" projections demonstrate the potential viability in terms of undergraduate numbers alone and setting aside the other essential functions of the proposed university.

Surplus undergraduate places at existing Australian universities will not meet the needs of the Territory. They do not provide the Territory with a base for relevant, regionally-oriented research; they do not provide for those who are unable to travel (for social or economic reasons) the long distances involved in enrolling interstate; they encourage the most able members of the community to drift away; they perpetuate a colonial attitude towards a territory which is an integral part of mainland Australia moving towards statehood.

The Northern Territory Government is not seeking support for the twentieth university in Australia but for the first University in the Northern Territory.

The Way Forward

The decision by the Commonwealth — announced in the Review of Commonwealth Functions speech of 30 April 1981 — not to provide funding for the proposed University in the 1982/84 triennium has not diminished the conviction of the Northern Territory Government regarding the need for the University, the justice of the case, or the viability of the proposed institution. The University Planning Authority has been encouraged to continue with its three major areas of activity:

- promoting the case for Commonwealth recognition and support of the proposal;
- planning the development of the institution; and
- providing for the evolution and development of those university-sector activities which may be undertaken in the Territory in advance of the establishment of the University.

From its inception, the University Planning Unit (now the University Planning Authority) has been concerned to promote university-sector activities in advance of the formal inauguration of the University.

The first publication produced for general consumption was a register of all research activities being undertaken in the Territory. Subsequently an amplified version of the initial register was printed and distributed. A revised and updated version is now in preparation.

A programme of public lectures was commenced. These are continuing, often in conjunction with other appropriate groups and agencies. As they become available, printed versions of the lectures are distributed.

Money has been directed to expanding the holdings of the State Reference library, which, by

Government decision, is to be incorporated in the University library. The Director of the NT Library Service is also now designated Planning Librarian for the University Planning Authority, and in the latter capacity has visited several existing University libraries.

A research awards programme has been commenced to assist Territorians who are undertaking postgraduate studies. (It is worth noting that one of the projects which has been supported through this programme — low cost air-conditioning — has attracted international interest.)

The Authority is involved in the organisation of several major conferences of relevance to the Territory.

Through a grant provided by the Menzies Foundation, a survey has been conducted to examine the feasibility of undertaking a longitudinal study of child development in the Territory.

The NT History Unit, formerly located within the Department of the Chief Minister, was recently transferred to the Authority.

On the recommendation of the Authority's Advisory Committee and taking into account the response to university-sector activities, the NT Government has now sought Commonwealth support for the progressive establishment of the University through the development of a series of postgraduate schools and centres specialising in matters of particular relevance to the Territory and the surrounding region.

The first such school — the Menzies School of Health Research — has been formally established in association with the Menzies Foundation, the University of Sydney and the NT Department of Health.

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NOTES FROM THE NORTH — REACTIONS TO THE UNIVERSITY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY PROPOSAL

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The Present Situation

In order to understand the movement that led to the proposal for the creation of a university in Darwin one needs to bear the following points in mind.

First the proposal is not new. There has been since the late 1960s a lobby favouring some kind of tertiary institution in Darwin. This lobby has usually had two arguments to put in support of its case:

- that it was an inequity that parents in the Northern Territory (NT) who wished their children to have a university education faced quite crippling costs in sending their children to and maintaining them through an undergraduate course.

- that the presence of a university would civilise the north by its very existence. A university presence would provide an infrastructure for research and teaching in areas in which the NT lacked and thus act as a haven in a materialistic and anti-intellectual community.

The lobby favoured the creation of a university college and took part in the various parliamentary enquiries that led to the creation of Darwin Community College (D.C.C.) in 1972. This solution arose from a compromise between the university lobby and those in favour of a technical training institution.¹

D.C.C. came into existence as a compromise that hoped to bridge the social and ideological divisions implicit in its foundation. It has done so simply by continuing to exist as one institution and to grow at better than the national average rate, but it has not created for itself a publicly accepted role that enables it to be seen as a desirable solution to the problem of poor school education in the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory Government does not prize its existence and the CTEC (who inherited it with the creation of self-government in the N.T.) insist on treating it as a combination of a CAE and a TAFE institution, which only magnifies whatever divisions of opinion exist within the College.

That the Northern Territory Government does not prize the existence of D.C.C. can be seen from a number of actions taken by the Government since 1979, e.g.

- It has diminished the D.C.C.'s autonomy by Act of the Legislative Assembly.

- It has, in making the university proposal, cannibalised the D.C.C. by removing from it U.G.I and U.G.2 courses in their present CAE form, to form the nucleus of the proposed university.

- It has failed to make clear to the CTEC the unusual nature of D.C.C. thereby forcing the College back into the CAE and TAFE pattern which in turn has prevented it from breaking out of the Australia-wide mould of a three level, three institution post-secondary system.

The Northern Territory Government thus at best views D.C.C. as an interim solution to the creation of a full tripartite post-school system. It seems not to have questioned the wisdom of imposing that solution on the N.T.

Finally it must be realised that the advent of self government, after sixty years of benevolent colonialism as Australia's on-shore Territory, resulted in an upsurge of State's-rights patriotism which takes a number of forms. Almost anything made in the Territory now bears a large distinctive logo to proclaim its superiority over southern products. Politically there has been a desire to create the infrastructure of a state, to wit art galleries, State libraries and so on. The university proposal I am sure belongs in the same genre. One cannot, for instance view the proposal as coming from any extensive public debate for a university, as the public remained mostly uninvolved in the initiation and planning of the proposal. There has been little public debate on the desirability of a university or on the form it should take. The ordinary citizen views it as an undefined 'good thing' if he or she thinks about it at all.

Against the background the proposal for a university can be readily seen as a proposal springing from the desire that the N.T. be a proper state, as well as from an unreflective dissatisfaction with the present situation of post-school education within Darwin. One must also say that the Planning Vice-Chancellor has made a proposal that maximises whatever virtues can be found within the practical limitations of the present situation.² The CTEC's rejection of that proposal is likewise couched in terms of practicability and so we can summarise the situation now as a stand-off. The Northern Territory Government thinks that a free standing, autonomous and quite orthodox university is practicable in Darwin now; the CTEC says no, it will cost too much.