**Nation debates “how?” Midland asks “where?”**

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In May the Howard government released it higher education reform package – *Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future.* Yesterday, in preparation for a major Senate debate, the Labor Party released its response, *Aim Higher*. There are big differences and the biggest, of course, is that the Government wants to shift more of the burden of payment onto students and their families by way increased fees. The Labour Party, on the other hand, proposes to cap fees and to provide more public funds for universities. Despite great differences the two policies share an important common feature: both are overwhelmingly preoccupied with **“how”** questions: **How** can weincrease the capacity of nation’s universities? **How** should we improve their quality? **How** should we pay for them?And so on.By contrast, neither gives much attention to **“where”** questions: **Where** should we provide them? It is as though the existing distribution of resources and opportunities constitutes an order that can no longer be questioned or improved. Regions like Midland which do not even appear on the radar screen when the debate is structured in this way, are the big losers.

In this short paper, the Friends of Midland University draws on the experience of the Midland region in eastern metropolitan Perth to highlight the disadvantages of major metropolitan regions that have no university facilities. The paper also asks why current national debate gives no attention to the geographic distribution of opportunities for higher learning in our major metropolitan centres.

**How and Where?**

Overwhelmingly, the current national higher education debate focuses on **“how”** questions: **How** can weincrease the capacity of nation’s universities? **How** should we improve their quality? **How** should we pay for them?And so on.[[1]](#footnote-1)By contrast, very little attention has been given to **“where”** questions: **Where** should we provide them? Some attention is given to additional funding for existing regional universities but none at all to the disadvantage of regions which do not yet have fair or reasonable access to university facilities. It is as though the existing distribution of resources and opportunities constitutes and order which can no longer be questioned or improved.

But not all are happy with the status quo. Just over a year ago *The Midland Reporter*[[2]](#footnote-2) ran a headline story about the lack of university facilities in Midland. Although the Midland region provided homes to 7,500 university students, it had no university campus. Midland’s students attended universities located in Perth’s central and western suburbs. This penalised Midland’s students forced to pay high commuting or relocation costs.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Midland regional community as whole also suffered. It sacrificed around $150 million pa in direct higher education expenditure. This money left the region with its students.[[4]](#footnote-4) So, too, did further indirect education expenditures - and their probable multiplier effects.

According to a local community action group, Friends of Midland University[[5]](#footnote-5), Perth’s eastern suburbs (home to some 500,000 people and well over one third of Perth’s population) provided only **1 university place for each 5,000 residents.** The city’s central and western suburbs, by contrast, enjoyed the benefit of **1 place per 20 residents.** At the same time, almost one third of Perth’s university students had permanent home addresses in the eastern suburbs.

The campaign for a better deal in Midland goes beyond informal community activism. That is to say, and a more formal group is now seeking improved and expanded higher education facilities for the region. This group, calling itself the *Midland Tertiary Education Working Party,* includes senior local and state government officials and representatives of two of Perth’s existing universities. The *Working Party* has recently appointed consultants to investigate feasible development options and institutional models for higher education facilities in Midland.

But will this impressive local effort lead anywhere while the national agenda for higher education reform continues to completely neglect **“where”** questions –questions about the distribution of opportunities for higher education. The answer is both sad and simple. Midland’s effort is not likely to go far and the gross educational disadvantages it suffers will continue to be ignored. Midland must argue its case more forcefully. Today, the implications of reduced access to substantial university facilities are greater than they have ever been. This must be made clear.

Universities, creativity and the knowledge economy

As the term itself suggests, the new knowledge economy depends increasingly on capacities of the human mind - on our creativity, intelligence, imagination and talent. US regional economist, Richard Florida, has provided the most detailed statement of this argument. In a bold new book, *The Rise of the Creative Class,* Florida, has argued that the fundamental change driving new knowledge economies

… is the rise of human creativity as the key factor in our economy and society. Both at work and in other spheres of our lives we value creativity more highly than ever and cultivate it more intensely. The creative impulse – the attribute that distinguishes us, as humans, from other species, is now being let loose on an unprecedented scale…[[6]](#footnote-6)

Not surprisingly Florida has also argued that institutions of higher learning are crucial to this change – and to economic success in the modern world.

In my view, the presence of a major research university is a basic infrastructure component of the Creative Economy – more important than the canals, railroads, and freeway systems of past epochs and a huge potential source of competitive advantage.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In support of this view Florida lists 26 US regional economies benefiting substantially from the presence of universities. Some half dozen of these are smaller than the Midland region.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Universities generate competitive advantage and prosperity, according to Florida, because they help to cultivate “creative capital” - and the “creative class”[[9]](#footnote-9) which is the subject of his book. But Florida’s work is most significant, perhaps, because he has attempted to measure the importance of creativity. He has attempted to measure the links between “creative capital”, his new “creative class” and economic performance – and significantly, the links are strong. It is these links, in any event, which establish the importance of universities in the new world of the knowledge economy. It is likewise these links which highlight what it means not to have a university; what it means, again, to be Midland.

# Midland’s long term losses

For Midland, and for other regional economies, the absence of a university means the absence of critical infrastructure necessary to cultivating “creative capital” or the “creative class”. Indeed, lacking this critical infrastructure, Midland does the opposite: it surrenders many of its creative people to out-of-town bidders. Some of the short term impacts of this “surrender” – when the young and creative study out of town – have been considered above. More serious are some of the long term losses experienced when young graduates decide to permanently relocate .

In the language of liberal social science, getting an education and moving to better suburbs are appreciated - and applauded - as evidence of upward social mobility. When geographic mobility is considered as part of the change, however, these welcomed events also have their darker sides: one metropolitan region’s gain then often becomes another region’s loss. Some differences between the Midland region and central metropolitan Perth are suggestive here: central Perth provides homes to almost twice as university students and twice as many graduates in proportional terms. It also has 50% more professionals in the workforce and 50% more families earning in excess of $1,500 weekly.[[10]](#footnote-10)

It is curious that public discussion recognises losses of this kind when talented Australians move overseas for the sake of access to more well-developed knowledge economies. When they move from one city quarter to another, however, the subject warrants comment less often. Perhaps we do not wish to see or confront the processes by means of which we make our cities and social worlds unequal. It is not clear, of course, how important the proximity of universities (and the local wealth they help to create) is in determining internal migration patterns. We can be sure, however, that they will become more significant as the knowledge base of our economy deepens and as ever more people require and seek university degrees.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The seriously uneven distribution of higher education facilities means more than the unfair distribution of social infrastructure. Advantage and disadvantage cut more deeply than this. Areas hosting substantial higher learning facilities use their advantage to drain strategic resources from the disadvantaged places in a process that is continuous, self-propelling and unending. Privileged and disadvantaged communities do not just appear, they do not spring into the world fully formed as rich or poor places. Increasingly, in the world of knowledge economies, they will be made rich or made poor by the movement of people. At the same time, losses will have increasingly long term downstream effects.

As time goes by, government departments involved in social security, community development, health care, housing assistance, rehabilitation and so on are called upon to shoulder some of the burden - and to intervene on the side of the losers. But their budgets, no matter how big, are never enough. And their programs, no matter how ingenious, are rarely adequate to the task. They never seem adequate, in any event, to make up for the original loss.

### Decentralisation and democratisation

Under these circumstances, the relentless centralisation and selective “regionalisation” of our institutions of higher learning become less and less defensible. When Perth was a smaller place and higher education was a more elite business, some defence was available. But as we move into the 21st Century of advanced knowledge economies and as Perth becomes a city of two million people, there is neither justification nor excuse . **It’s time to start thinking more seriously about the distribution – and democratisation – of opportunities for higher learning in Perth.**

Opponents of democratisation will draw attention to the critical importance of economies of scale and loss of quality as university campuses multiply. Here it is worth recalling that senior high schools were, not so long ago, also elite institutions limited in number. And they were able to survive decentralising and democratising reforms embarked upon for the sake of fairer and better educated communities. Who would still defend the old order here? Undergraduate university study could now easily move further in this direction without loss of quality.[[12]](#footnote-12)

It is important, of course, to keep matters in perspective: the emphasis is on the broad democratising spirit and direction of the high school reforms noted above. A case is not being made here for dozens of university campuses. In eastern metropolitan Perth Friends of Midland University is proposing one new university campus or higher education precinct for a region providing homes to almost 300,000 Western Australians. Another sobering reflection is also worthwhile here: the Joondalup region less than half the size of Midland, hosts in excess of 4,000 university places.[[13]](#footnote-13) **Are we now deliberately building a class divided city?**

It’s Midland’s time for a university, not a mean user-pays institution or a traditional seat of higher learning but an innovative one funded as all universities should be – as strategic public investments. Of course, the term innovation begs many questions and most of these must be left to one side here. To end on more upbeat note, however, one possible innovative development option seems worth very briefly sketching.

# One vision

Midland already hosts significant TAFE facilities and is soon to host more.

**Imagine** a TAFE campus that raised its academic ceiling without at the same time raising its relaxed entry level. This would effectively expand gateways and ease entry to the world of higher learning. It would further democratise it. This is not a remotely radical proposal. One of the background reports (*Varieties of Learning*[[14]](#footnote-14)) underpinning the Nelson Review explores ways of strengthening links between higher education and vocational education. *Varieties of Learning* also notes that WA is national leader in some forms of innovation on this front. Let’s do a little more here.

**Imagine** also a TAFE that deepened its learning culture without abandoning its more technical orientation and, in the same movement, broadened the scope of its curriculum. In WA, Curtin University which began its life as a more humble institute of technology (WAIT) provides an interesting model and could well provide something of a blue print for bolder 21st century educational innovation. Industries of all kinds are now favouring generic problem-solving capacities over narrow technical specialism in their new recruits.

**Imagine** a TAFE which added to the “how” questions it traditionally favours by also introducing students seriously to “why” issues – or issues about ethical limits, social costs, political regulation and so on. So augmented, training becomes education, and the more of us that have it the better whether we are modern plumbers or professors of medieval poetry. In short, wherever it takes place, post secondary education should be concerned not just with technical competence but with but professional self consciousness, broader critical capacity and for want of a better term, civic literacy. The cleverness which our higher education created would then also have more depth.

Again, there is nothing radical about these proposals and the values they express inform the whole of the *Our Universities* review. Thus a key goal of our universities should, according to the Federal Minister for Education, be

#### to contribute to a democratic, civilised society and promote the tolerance and debate that underpins it.

Finally, let this new institution strike root on the magnificent site of the Midland Railway Workshops site – and then let it grow to spill over the railway line and help to re-occupy and re-invigorate old Midland Town. In so doing, it would also help to turn Midland into place which not made clever people locally but which also attracted them from other places - and began to make up for some past losses.

1. *Our Universities* is based on 6 reviews including: 1.*Striving for quality: Learning, teaching and scholarship*; 2. *Setting firm foundations: Financing Australian Higher education*; 3.*Varieties of excellence: Diversity, specialisation and regional engagement*; 4.*Achieving equitable and appropriate outcomes: Indigenous Australians in higher education*; 5.*Meeting the challenges: The governance and management of universities*; 6.*Varieties of learning: The interface between higher education and vocational education and training*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Midland Reporter*, June 4th 2002, p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These costs partly explain why university students make up only 2.8% of the Midland region population while making up 4.6% of central metropolitan Perth - [www.citizenonline.org](http://www.citizenonline.org). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Midland Reporter*, June 4th 2002, p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [www.citizenonline.org](http://www.citizenonline.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Florida, R. The Rise of the Creative Class, Basic Books, New York, 2002, p4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Florida, op.cit. 2002, p291-292. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Florida defines his creative class in both functional terms (it creates “meaningful new forms” and it engages in “complex problem solving” – Florida, op.cit. 2002, p68-69) and occupational terms (see Florida, op.cit. 2002, p68-69). This class, he argues, is growing dramatically in modern knowledge economies. In the US, for example, after holding steady at around 20% of the workforce during the 1970s and 1980s it has grown to 30% during the 1990s. In absolute terms this has meant a rise from 20 million to 30 million creative workers over this period (Florida, op.cit. 2002, p74). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See [www.citizenonline.org](http://www.citizenonline.org) for more detailed data and definitions of regions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Between 1992 and 2002 university student enrolments grew from 559,000 to 835,000 or by some 35% over the decade - *The Australian*, May 7th 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is worth noting that *Backing Australia’s Ability* welcomes theidea of specialised institutions of higher learning focussed more specifically on teaching. See background review paper *Varieties of Excellence: Diversity, Specialisation and Regional Engagement,* Commonwealth Dept. of Education, Science and Training, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [www.citizenonline.org](http://www.citizenonline.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Varieties of learning: The interface between higher education and vocational education and training,* Commonwealth Dept. of Education, Science and Training, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)