

## **The Soul of Higher Education: Time for a Re-formation.**

Sean Brawley and Mark Byers

In Texas, a Tesla Model Y rolls off the factory floor and drives itself to a customer's home. Meanwhile, Meta pours billions into securing a handful of AI experts whose work could tilt the fortunes of the company—and the world. These aren't distant forecasts; they're headlines from recent weeks. They signal a technological tectonic shift already shaking the ground beneath us. We're not merely talking about transformation—it's here, relentless, and redefining every sector it touches.

While Tesla and Meta ride this seismic change, the new Australian Tertiary Education Commission has just opened its doors onto a landscape in crisis—not a manufactured crisis as some like to protest, but a genuine crisis. Declining domestic enrolments, persistent uncertainty around international onshore education, waves of job losses, and a mounting challenge to the sector's social license are merely surface cracks in a deeper structural fault line.

Pundits have quickly added AI to the list of higher education's challenges. To their credit, many colleagues continue to grapple with AI—finding ways to mitigate assessment risks, tweak curricula, or improve institutional processes. Some of our colleagues, still relatively few in number, now see AI as an opportunity rather than a threat. But, to mix metaphors, here's the problem: Are we simply deploying AI to build a better widget, blind to the possibility that the age of widgets has already ended? We appear to be patching up an old structure while tectonic plates are shifting beneath us at levels never before recorded on our sector's Richter scale. It's time for root-and-branch transformation if higher education is to remain fit for purpose in a world being relentlessly remade around it.

The big question — for ATEC, for corporate and academic governance, for executive leaders and colleagues at the coalface—is whether we can get beyond outdated, confirmation-driven models with their invisible norms. We need re-formation, not merely renewal.

We believe the path to meaningful and sustainable re-formation lies not only in forging ahead, but in looking back to reaffirm the deeper foundations of

higher education. If we are serious about fundamental change, we must be willing to interrogate the assumptions and the ecosystem that have sustained the sector for so long.

Can we rekindle the soul of higher education? In grappling with this question, we've been drawn to enduring Humboldtian ideas. Yet our focus is not on Wilhelm, whose vision is already woven into the fabric of the modern Australian university. Rather, we find inspiration in the work of his younger brother Alexander, and his concept of *Bildung*—a timely reminder that universities exist not only to equip students for professional and vocational success, but to cultivate critical thinking, ethical judgment, cultural understanding, and the capacity for democratic citizenship — the very attributes most needed in a world undergoing tectonic change.

In exploring such ideas, we find resonance with the field of Critical University Studies, particularly in its interrogation of how universities have evolved under the pressures of marketisation, managerialism, and widening social inequalities. There's much to value in its call to reaffirm higher education as a public good rather than merely a market commodity. Yet from our perspective, we're cautious about attributing all the sector's ills solely to the ferocity of late-industrial capitalism. While market forces have undeniably shaped the modern university, we believe the challenges run deeper — to institutional cultures, entrenched norms, and structures increasingly misaligned with the demands of a rapidly transforming world.

While the sector faces technological challenges often met with technological solutions, we assert that true change must be social, cultural, and institutional—not merely technical.

We are seeking to build a community of practice of like-minded individuals (including academics, professional staff, students and other stakeholders in higher education) who are interested in exploring how we can imagine and deliver a re-formed future for higher education.

If you'd like to add your voice to our community of practice — and help shape the future, please [join us](#).

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