

Possible Futures for Higher Education Research and Research Centres in Australia

Richard James*

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Thank you, Professor Huang. Can I begin by thanking Professor Abe and Professor Kobayashi for their opening remarks. Some of the points that Professor Kobayashi made about Japanese higher education research are similar to the ones I am about to make about Australian higher education research.

I am deeply honored to be invited to speak at this symposium. I've had a long relationship with RIHE and with Japanese Higher Education overall, and it's been a very important part of my career. Professor Huang invited me to offer some comments on Australian higher education research and our research centers. So, very ambitiously, in 20 minutes I am going to offer you some reflections on the state of higher education research in Australia and possible futures. Unfortunately, I am concerned about the state of higher education research in Australia, so some of my comments are a little bit pessimistic.

Firstly, I could begin by offering my personal thanks and the thanks of my Australian colleagues to the work that RIHE has done over the last 50 years. Warm congratulations to all of you, RIHE colleagues past and present. It's not easy to keep an Institute alive for 50 years. It's a magnificent achievement.

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When I think of RIHE, three things that stand out for me. The first is the deep international engagement that RIHE has had for a long period now. That is a credit to all of you. Second, I acknowledge the contribution that you've made by publishing in both Japanese and English, which has been part of your internationalization strategy, and an important element in that. Finally, you've been generous hosts for many of us over the year. Professor Huang mentioned my own extended visit to RIHE, which was in the Spring of 2001, which in many ways changed my career.

Professor Simon Marginson, who will be speaking later, is another Australian who was fortunate enough to be hosted by RIHE. Can I offer my special thanks to Professor Yonezawa, who was my first contact with RIHE, and also to Professor Huang, of course, who's been a great colleague for a long time now. But there are so many other notable RIHE scholars that I should mention, including Arimoto, Yamamoto, Hata, Oba, Daizen, Murasawa, and Sugimoto who have been good colleagues of mine at RIHE. Thank you for being excellent researchers and excellent colleagues and friends over that period.

So, let me begin my presentation formally. I think it's true to say that historically Australian higher education researchers have had a very strong record of publication. I believe it was Malcolm Tight who did an analysis of the output of higher education researchers many years ago. This analysis showed that Australian researchers were publishing at a very high rate, given the size of the higher education system in Australia. And very broadly speaking, there's been two important strands of research. The first was around Learning and Teaching in Higher Education with very prominent scholars such as Ramsden, Prosser, and Trigwell. But equally important is the area of study that is largely around policy, higher education systems, internationalization, rankings, and related areas. Australia has had, I believe, a proud record in these areas. Notable scholars include the late Professor Grant Harman; Professor Simon Marginson, who we will hear from in a moment; the late Professor Lynn Meek (sadly, Lynn passed away recently); and Professor Leo Goedegebuure.

It's equally true that Australia had many strong centres for higher education research. I haven't listed all of them on this slide, but I've noted some of the key centres that we have had in Australia that have conducted quite vibrant and strong research programs in higher education. These include the Melbourne Center for the Study of Higher Education, of which I am a former director; the Centre for

Higher Education Management and Policy at the University of New England; Griffith Institute for Higher Education at Griffith University; the Australian Council for Educational Research, which sits outside of the university system; the LH Martin Institute for Leadership and Management; and the Grattan Institute, which is a research organization that also had a research program in higher education.

But in the last 5 to 10 years, we have definitely witnessed a decline in the number of centres, the size of the centers and the number of higher education researchers. So, similar to the situation in Japan that Professor Kobayashi mentioned, a number of centers and programs have ceased operating entirely or have been downsized. Some universities have folded their higher education research into education faculties more broadly, where it's very difficult, I believe, for higher education research to maintain its distinctiveness.

It has also been a trend towards centres that once conducted higher education research, becoming exclusively or almost exclusively academic development units, training units to train faculty in teaching and learning practices. So, remembering that this is a paper based on impressions, I haven't compiled a full list of all the centers, for my intention is simply to offer you an illustration of the centers that no longer exist in Australia — and these were once prominent centers or research programs.

I will reflect for a moment on the Melbourne Center for the Study of Higher Education. The Melbourne CSHE still enjoys very strong support from the University of Melbourne. During the period in which Simon Marginson and I were at the CSHE, our annual budget was comprised of approximately 50% from a grant from the university and approximately 50% from research income.

The Centre for the Study of Higher Education is now relying on about 80% to 90% of its income from the university grant and is able to earn perhaps 10% to 20% of its overall revenue from research grants. Those broad figures are intended to illustrate a point that I am going to make in a moment about the difficulty in securing funding for research.

The LH Martin Institute for Leadership and Management is now within the Centre for the Study of Higher Education. It began with a government grant that lasted for a number of years. The LH Martin Institute is intended to be a self-funding

entity. Professor Lynn Meek was its inaugural Director. The LH Martin Institute now relies to some extent on financial support from the University of Melbourne. So again, LH Martin Institute is in a situation where it's very difficult to maintain a research institute if you are relying on external funding.

I wish to comment on the reasons for a general decline in higher education research in Australia. The first reason is the university researchers in the field of higher education and the research centers in higher education now find themselves competing against commercial consultancy companies for research grants. Now, these are very applied grants, of course, but commissioned research has historically been one of the pathways to financial security for research centers like the Centre for the Study of Higher Education. But this source of research revenue is very difficult to secure these days, because the major consultancy companies have taken command of the market. This is a particularly challenging context for junior researchers. And without significant funding, without secure sources of funding, it's quite difficult to carry out research that relies on empirical work and significant data collection.

The second reason is that there has been a decline in the willingness of government and the willingness of universities to invest in higher education research. I am not convinced that governments and university managers have maintained significant respect for the value of higher education research. This is a major issue, I believe, for higher education researchers in Australia.

Finally, the third reason is one that I probably need to spend more time on than I have available to me this evening. Careers for higher education researchers are very difficult at the moment. It is challenging to find a secure tenured position within a higher education research centre in Australia. I believe that in Australia we have not been renewing and replenishing our higher education research community.

I would like to show you one data point to illustrate how difficult it is to secure significant funding for pure research in Australia. I am drawing on the premier funding scheme in Australia, the Australian Research Council and its prestigious Discovery Grant Program. This is merely illustrative, colleagues, but in 2021, in Australia overall across all fields of study there were 587 Discovery Grants awarded. A little less than 1/5th of those were in the social and behavioral sciences cluster. Of the 109 projects awarded, only five projects were funded in education

overall, and two were in higher education. Those two were good projects I must say. One was on the internationalization of Asian higher education, a major issue in Australia, of course; and the other was on ‘big data analytics’ on student learning. The two themes of this research are illustrative of the issues of importance in Australia.

So, the simple point of this slide, of course, is to show you that it’s unlikely that many higher education researchers in Australia will win Australian Research Council funding. Now, there’s more to this story of course! But I only have 20 minutes today, so I can’t spend more time on this — and I would be remiss if I didn’t mention that Professor Simon Marginson has a glorious track record in winning Australian Research Council grants. Well done, Simon.

What’s the future of higher education research in Australia? Well, I am sorry about my negativity here. But when I look at much of the research, the published journal articles, much is comprised of what I would describe as ‘one-off’ case studies. Good papers in most cases, but they are based on local issues, local practices. We’re seeing much less research activity focused on system-wide issues and less work on policy. There are many, many articles on teaching and learning initiatives and teaching enhancement, and much less work on higher education systems management and policy. Maybe that reflects my own personal interest, but I’d certainly like to see more work on HE systems and policy.

The higher education research community in Australia has always been small, if we are to be honest, but it’s very small now and it’s disparate. We see fewer sites of ‘critical mass’ that bring together clusters of talented and influential researchers. We also seeing some higher education researchers operating in their universities as individual researchers in the absence of dedicated HE units.

My next observation can be contested, I suppose, but I suspect higher education research is now less influential on policy and practice than it has been in the past. Now, this in some ways is a puzzling situation because there are so many areas that would benefit from high quality higher education research. I am not going to go through the list on this slide item by item, but there are so many areas that are to do with the post-COVID circumstances, as Professor Kobayashi mentioned. There’s so much new research potentially around data analytics. As well in Australia at least, we are witnessing a much deeper public commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion in our universities, which have always been prominent

areas for research in Australia. At the moment, the Australian context is ripe for more research in these areas.

And then the fourth one I want to mention is something is changing about the intellectual climate in our universities. And it's a worrying change in some ways. So, questions are being asked in Australia around the place of freedom of speech in our universities, the emergence of 'cancel culture,' as it's called, and whether or not universities are home to a sufficiently diverse set of viewpoints on social issues. And I really don't see enough people researching, higher education researchers researching these things at the moment.

So, to my final slide. Where do we go from here? Well, I believe that we need an agenda in Australia to rebuild higher education research. A first step is to rebuild the confidence of university management in the value of having independent higher education researchers who devote themselves to the study of higher education. I also believe that researchers in universities need to learn from the nimble and high quality work that we are seeing from commercial consultancy companies who are undertaking investigations that are, in my view, scholarly, fast, and of much value. We need to be more responsive to the markets in which we operate.

Across Australia, all of our researchers are now being asked to consider the impact and influence of their research, and how they can build pathways to impact. I believe the 'impact' imperative is especially urgent for higher education research and higher education researchers. We need to do some deep thinking about how can we frame research studies, publications and the communication of that research in a way that has the most impact and influence on higher education practice.

And, finally, we need to find the resources to support early career researchers in the field of higher education so that they have secure academic positions and are able to develop their careers.

I will apologize again for the somewhat gloomy or pessimistic reflection that I've offered you. But I am genuinely concerned about the state of higher education research in Australia and I do believe that there is much work to be done to elevate its standing and positive influence.

I will conclude by sharing with you a photo in my collection, taken at RIHE. Thank you all once again and congratulations on RIHE's 50th anniversary. You see there in the photo Professor Hata, the late Professor Grant Harman, Professor Kay Harman, the late Professor Keith Morgan, Professor Huang, and myself.

Thank you.

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Richard James
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Former Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education
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Firstly, warmest congratulations from Australia to all RIHE colleagues, past and present, on achieving the Institute's 50th anniversary

Particular congratulations, and thanks, for:

- Your energetic and sustained international engagement over a long period
- Your publication program in both Japanese and English
- Your warm and generous hosting of international visitors

My personal thanks to Professor Akiyoshi Yonezawa (who I first met around 1999-2000) for introducing me to RIHE and to Professor Futao Huang for our very interesting interactions over the past 20 years.

Historically, Australia has had a strong record of higher education research and scholars who have been internationally prominent

The output of journal articles has been high (in terms of HE system size) with notable areas across the 1990s and 2000s such as :

- Learning and teaching in higher education (Ramsden, Prosser, Trigwell et al)
- Policy, systems, internationalisation, rankings and much more (including Harman, Marginson, Meek, Goedegebuure etc.)

In the past there were a number of significant clusters of researchers and research programs, with Melbourne (the city) hosting many. For example:

- Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education
- Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy, University of New England
- Griffith Institute for Higher Education
- Australian Council for Educational Research
- LH Martin Institute for Leadership and Management in Tertiary Education
- Grattan Institute research program in higher education

As a broadbrush generalisation, the centres/units/institutes/programs engaged in higher education have shrunk or been abandoned. The clusters of higher education researchers are smaller and more disparate.

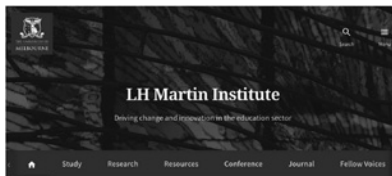
Centres/Programs have stopped operation or have been down-sized.

Universities have folded higher education research into educational research faculties or centres

There has been a trend towards university centres being exclusively service units (ie Academic Development Units that train faculty)

In the past there were a number of significant clusters of researchers and research programs, with Melbourne (the city) hosting many. For example:

- Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education
- ~~Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy, University of New England~~
- ~~Griffith Institute for Higher Education~~
- Australian Council for Educational Research
- LH Martin Institute for Leadership and Management in Tertiary Education (**now within the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education**)
- ~~Grattan Institute research program in higher education~~



Welcome to the LH Martin Institute – a research and development body created to serve and support the leadership and management needs of the higher and vocational education sectors.

What are the reasons for the decline in HE research intensity? This is speculative, but I see these factors ...

- **THE RISE OF COMMERCIAL INTERESTS** Commercial consultancy companies conducting commissioned research (one of the biggest challenges for university centres and researchers).
- **PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE OF RESEARCH** Governments less willing to commission HE research, universities less willing to invest in higher education researchers (ironically, university managers may not be convinced of the value of higher education research conducted from within the academy!)
- **RESEARCH FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES** Research funding for large-scale, sustained funding is now much harder to secure.
- **CAREERS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCHERS** There are fewer career opportunities for dedicated HE researchers.

Let me illustrate with the 2021 Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grants that were awarded (this is admittedly only one data point, but it is illustrative). These are prestigious competitive grants for pure research

In total, 587 Discovery Grants were awarded.

Of these, 109 were in the *Social/Behavioural Sciences* cluster.

Of these, **five** were projects in Education

Of these, **two** were projects in Higher Education

(the themes being internationalisation in Asian higher education and big-data analytics on student learning)

The future of higher education research in Australia is uncertain

- Many of the journal articles from Australian authors are case studies of local issues and practices, there is an absence of systemic analyses.
- Articles on teaching and learning initiatives and enhancement are prominent and there is less work on HE systems, management and policy.
- The higher education research community is small and disparate. There are fewer sites of 'critical mass'.
- Arguably, higher education research is less influential on policy and practice than in the past.

Australian higher education would benefit from more intense, sustained research in a number of areas:

- New modes of teaching and learning post-COVID
- Data analytics for understanding and improving teaching and learning
- Responses to the emergent public commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion
- The intellectual climate in universities (freedom of speech, 'cancel culture', diversity of viewpoints, etc)
- New patterns of academic work and the future of the academic profession
- Higher education and sustainability

And the 'perennials':

- Higher education policy, leadership and management, higher education system design and effectiveness
- The economics of higher education, higher education outcomes

Key challenges for higher education researchers in Australian

- Re-building the confidence of university management in the value of having independent researchers who are devoted to the study of higher education.
- Learning from the nimbleness of commercial consultancy companies and their capacity to undertake investigations that are scholarly, fast and practically valuable.
- Building a new understanding of the impact and influence of higher education and the pathways to impact.
- Nurturing a new generation of researchers devoted to higher education studies and who have secure academic positions.

