A new term seems to have taken hold in the higher education lexicon: ‘tipping point’. Education columnists, university commentators and higher education scholars are all appropriating this metaphor to describe the impacts – observed and predicted – on Australia’s universities of a ‘demand-driven system’; a system in which there are no longer Commonwealth prescribed enrolment quotas for students in various disciplines (except, of course, for Medicine where allocations are rigorously controlled).

Tipping points are common in the history of higher education in Australia. All have been in one way or another occasioned by social and economic forces, policy reforms, or changing ideologies and values. These have included the professionalisation of the trades, services and crafts, the emancipation movements that gave women and those of modest means the chance to go to university, notions of social justice and the rights of people in a minority (most importantly, Aboriginal Australians) and the need for a much more highly skilled workforce as the primary source of work to be done. All these at various times have been played up or down by governments of different colours to progressively shape the sector we see today.

In our time, of course, the most arresting discontinuity was between the post-school educational landscape of the 80s and that of the 90s. Policy debates since then, depending on the perspective and memory of the observer, have in some way taken the abolition of the binary system and the consequent doubling of the number of universities as the moment that either wreaked irreparable damage on higher education in Australia or was an inspired vision and prelude to a fairer, more inclusive and more diverse system. Much that has played out since then, whether the rapid growth in student numbers and grants-in-aid in the first half of the 90s, or the decline (in real terms) in recurrent funding in the ten years after that and associated increases in HECS, have been reactive attempts to build a robust and competitive sector while controlling or rationing resources following the sharp increase and progressive growth in student numbers.

In 1999, fearing incursions by the long-established universities, many universities volubly resisted the notion of vouchers proposed by Dr David Kemp, the then Minister for Education, whereby each student would have an entitlement to a specified number of years of higher education and could parlay it into a place anywhere she or he wished (and was accepted). It took some changes of government and ministers, but in the interests of achieving the 40% goal of 25 to 34 year olds holding degrees, vouchers have effectively arrived. If we enrol a student the Commonwealth will pay its share. The so-called “uncapping” of places has created, if not a free market, certainly a demand-driven system, a partially deregulated system (on numbers but not price) that is more fluid and negotiable for students and more unpredictable and market-like for universities. We are now competing for an indeterminate number of students – assuming we want to grow, or at least not shrink – on a broad spectrum of preparedness for university study in a system that is divided by affiliations (the Go8, ATN, IRUs and so on), rankings (student ATARs, research performance) and slow-to-shift perceptions of prestige and excellence.

All this is taking place in what Simon Marginson, a prominent Higher Education Policy Researcher based at the University of Melbourne, calls a “status market” where the value of a degree is shaped by the institution’s prestige and the professional labour markets. He writes that:

Emerging universities that teach well rarely receive full credit. They are forever judged and found wanting. The Group of Eight with inherited reputations and resources are sitting pretty1.

In the absence of a truly differentiated system, a sector characterised by diversity of mission, roles, status, students and staff, in which not all aspire to the same markers of excellence, Marginson continues, the middle tier of universities, and arguably that’s us, will in this new world “agonise over the balance between building up student volume and research building”. And if price is deregulated (in other words universities can charge students whatever they like, possibly up to a much higher ceiling as in the U.K.) by an incoming coalition government the vertical status hierarchy will be amplified even further.

The advocates of institutional diversity in the sector are not always benign in their representations, at least not from our vantage point. ‘Diversity’ is often a euphemism for a fractionated system, differentiated by research intensity, the ability to charge higher fees and age – broadly research universities, teaching universities and an indeterminate few in the middle. Or even more starkly, the universities that uphold quality and standards, as evidenced by their high

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1 Trounson, A, ‘Uni head lobbies for right to set own fees’, The Australian, 14 March 2012, p.2
ATAR student cohorts, and those of questionable quality who enrol the academic battlers and unfortunates.

The reality is that we, UWS, as young as we may be, are already a microcosm of the existing diversity of the sector. We admit, support and graduate students at all levels of educational preparedness, we take pride in our accomplished research teams and emerging institutes, which equal many in the sector on any standard measure, we offer a comprehensive academic program, our campuses bespeak pride of place and efficient but contemporary design sensibility, and our students’ feedback tells us they both value and like studying at UWS.

Glyn Davis², Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, in his recent National Press Club speech on the quiet revolution in higher education said that:

A demand driven system is micro-economic reform similar to the deregulation of banking in the 1980s, to the introduction of private providers into public utilities in the 1990s, to the contracting out of government services in the 2000s.

Like those changes, the introduction of market arrangements will profoundly alter the sector. It means that students – not Commonwealth bureaucrats and, increasingly, not academics – will decide what universities teach...........

Markets change everything. The introduction of market logic will upset hierarchies and impose rapid institutional transformation.

We have, said Davis, floated our dollar and embarked on an extraordinary journey.

The Go8 are not surprisingly lobbying energetically for price deregulation. The Vice-Chancellor of UNSW, Fred Hilmer³ is quoted as saying that:

Price flexibility would provide a market differentiation, with students able to choose between universities charging a premium price and universities offering lower fees.

The advocates of the uncapping of price in my view should be careful what they wish for, and we should worry for the sake of the students about their wish coming true. Inasmuch as Australian and U.K. higher education bureaucrats and politicians watch carefully each other’s policy inventions and have tended to serially modify and adopt these, the recent almost tripling to 9,000 GBP of the amount students can be charged, under a loans scheme, with a real interest rate, has enabled government to gut its own allocations. The Open University, for instance, is losing 83% of its government funding and students will make up the difference – although the OU with its 265,000 students is an exception in only moving student fees to 5,000 GBP. Most have embraced the full 9,000 GBP (that’s about $14,300 AUD) without apparently being too disturbed, at least publicly, by the social justice implications of a system which will leave a generation of graduates, as well as those who fail to complete a degree, burdened by debt. The benefit for the Exchequer is somewhat illusory since the Government will be sitting on a ballooning debt, some of which will never be paid back. The Australian Government Actuary estimated that the value of accumulated HELP debt not expected to be repaid was around $5.2 billion and that the accumulated deferral cost was $2.3 billion⁴. Still with the magic of accounting conventions student loans constitute an asset on the books rather than a liability.

Even the traditional alliances in Australia on fee deregulation (initially Go8 for, the rest against) are breaking up, with the Vice-Chancellors of both Melbourne University and of the Australian Catholic University jointly backing allowing universities to set their own undergraduate fee scales, and the Vice-Chancellor of UTS reported as saying it is “inevitable”. Glyn Davis and Greg Craven⁵ jointly write that the problem is that we have created an open market in student numbers but kept a fixed price in student contributions....But they write, “if there is a way of getting more funding into a genuinely diverse, cash-hungry and expanding system, do it.”

But if we do see the uncapping of fees, experience here and in the U.K. tells us few universities will compete on price and those which hold fees down will risk being seen as less attractive. Almost all will take the chance to move fees up to any allowable ceiling, especially if Government withdraws or minimises its contribution and student fees are still met by HECS loans, with implications for access, equity and participation, and for the viability of some universities. But at some stage it may happen and we need to be prepared.

But even if universities do enter a bidding war for students in this contestable world, the early signs from the U.K.5 are not good. The so-called “squeezed middle”, the post-1992 universities, is projected to lose around 13% of their undergraduate intake and about half of their government growth is to be replaced by student fees. The Russell Group universities who have the right to unlimited recruitment of high achieving (AAB) students outside the Government cap may be untouched. The government has held back 20,000 places for universities that charge 7,500 GBP or less, but whether many will take advantage of this is uncertain.

The title of this paper “Young and Old” doesn’t just refer to the newer universities (the “young”) and those which emerged in Australia in the 1800s (with the exception of the ANU) the “old”. I resisted the urge to preface it with “It’s on for....”, but it is – on for young and old, that is. Contestability is not novel in Australia. It is a driver of much that we do. We don’t just want to be excellent. We want to be better, better than rival institutions, polite though that rivalry may be. We are already in, and will see played out over coming years, a repositioning of universities in the Australian landscape not only relative to each other but in the larger tertiary sector, including the VET sector and the private providers.

Let me turn for a moment to the present day UWS. The growth and development of UWS has been remarkable. In anticipation of the new Commonwealth regime and of demand in the Greater West we set a goal of 2.5% per annum growth in commencing student numbers, taking us from just on 40,000 students in 2011 to 50,000 in 2020. As we know from experience, such goals need to be malleable if conditions and policies change.

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2 Davis, G, National Press Club Address, 7 March 2012
3 Williams, L, ‘Feeding the Knowledge Economy’, Campus Review, 17 Apr 2012, p.12
4 Higher Education Base Funding Review Final Report, October 2011
5 Morgan, J, ‘Squeezed middle feels pinch as grant and numbers decline’, Times Higher Education, 29 Mar 2012, p.6
and not used to imprudently drive expenditure or borrowings that will constitute a millstone for the future stewards of UWS.

Our growth strategy is not immune from the manoeuvrings of our institutional neighbours. This year we projected an ongoing and steady increase of 2.5% on commencing enrolments, when literally overnight during January, Sydney University made 17.6% more offers through UAC than the year before, and reportedly accepted in the order of 20% of their students outside the UAC system. The increase in applications across all universities in NSW and the ACT was 2.5%. The loss of these potential students meant our offer tally dropped by 2.6% from 2011 to 2012. Sydney’s move may relate to a drop in international student numbers and their well publicised financial problems and cuts in expenditure and academic staff. But whatever the reason, the waves of storms elsewhere break on our shores and we need to be able to recalibrate quickly and rethink our strategy so we are not caught in a budgetary vice. Arising from this and possibly other dynamics, the post-census data on student enrolments has us down $10.8 million on our projected CGS/HECS revenue in our 2012 income, a dip in a previously anticipated multi-year upward trend in Commonwealth supported students. Our international student revenue this year has remained steady at around $57 million, although international student enrolments dropped by close to 80 between 2011 and 2012, and with a diminished pipeline we expect a drop in international student revenue over the next year or two. Sector-wide international student revenue will be down 21% to $14 billion next year from its peak of $18 billion in 2009.

Mind you, this rapid expansion, not just in UWS, but across the sector, in anticipation of the deregulation of places, has its detractors as well as its advocates. The Go8 representatives are on record as saying that rapid enrolment growth drives down admission standards and threatens the quality of higher education. Their analysis found the number of offers made to students with “very low” ATARS more than doubled between 2008 and 2011 from 2,100 to 4,300. The Go8 observed that the uncapped supply of new places is having a much larger impact on offer rates for students with ATARs of less than 70 who “account for more than three-quarters of the growth in offers.” They conclude that “more open admission standards and threatens the quality of higher education.

The Australian Financial Review summarised it thus, citing the growth in Commonwealth place numbers at UWS, Mike Gallagher of the Group of Eight said many institutions aren’t resourced to put the effort in to the kids that need more help to succeed, so either you’re going to see a higher failure rate or you are going to see a reduction in the quality of a degree.

An editorial citing undergraduate numbers at UNSW, Sydney University and UWS opines that:

These enormous numbers would once have represented the full undergraduate enrolment of those institutions. Inevitably this rapid change will produce dislocation – shortages of lecturers and tutors, packed lecture theatres, inadequate resources. For students, entering university will more than ever mean sudden immersion in a vast, cold, impersonal institution, where no one on staff has the time to give individual attention. The education revolution may indeed be a revolution, but the sausage-factory atmosphere it is inducing in our universities is getting further and further from education.

Our own growth in numbers and in income over the last 10 years has been accompanied by a concomitant rise in spending on buildings, equipment, laboratories and six campuses, and on paying salaries (63% of our expenditure in 2012), utilities, phone, IT, and all of the central costs of compliance management systems, preparing for audits or accreditations, travel, research enhancement, student services and so on.

There have, however, been questions about whether our plans for buildings and refurbishment are sustainable. The fruits of this expenditure, of course, are for all to see. Our campuses used to look like what they were – unkempt survivors from the 1970s and 1980s on the whole undistinguished architecturally, aesthetically, socially, functionally, or technically. Today they are attractive contemporary and inviting and speak to the renewal and growth of UWS over the last 10 years.

However there is no doubt that in order to secure our future we need, as we have always done, to re-invent our strategy to weatherproof the University against any unpredicted turbulence. As at Sydney University, other universities have already sailed into stormy seas and are drastically cutting costs, including staff numbers. Our growth in student numbers has enabled us to recruit superb new academic staff from Australia and overseas, and has generated just enough, with substantial extra grants from the Commonwealth to build, refurbish, invest in research, improve the working environment in all kinds of ways, and sustain a robust, enterprising, exciting and, dare I say, happy institution. However, this year we are seeing a shift which we do not want to see become a trend.

What could happen then? I have chanced my hand to outline a hypothetical and salutary position in around five years time as I imagine it, bearing in mind, with a nod to Mark Twain, that prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.

It’s 2017. The new government is approaching its first election. As always, the battlegrounds are chestnuts like taxation, climate change, gay marriage, family allowances, schools and business concessions, flavoured with a dash of religious hyperbole. Higher education doesn’t really figure in the brew. It rarely does. But behind the scenes Vice-Chancellors continue to lobby their Minister and local members spiritedly advocate for their institutions’ interests invoking the knowledge economy, the rise of China, social justice, OECD comparisons and international

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6 Connelly, S, ‘Data confirms 2020 for return to student peak’, The Australian, 9 May 2012, p.34
7 Go8, Policy Note Number 3, February 2012, p.6
Back at UWS the new Vice-Chancellor has just visited the School of Business because of reports that the Dean has locked himself in the office with a bottle of the best and is muttering to himself about foreigners and carpetbaggers. His enrolment figures have dropped dramatically for the fifth year in a row and his best staff have abandoned UWS to take up well remunerated positions at an elegantly accommodated business college at Homebush built by a Brazilian tycoon which grew dramatically when private providers were given access to HECS places.

The VC talked him into coming out with a florid account of the disasters in Health and Science, which, when the CGS was withdrawn and HECS quadrupled to make up for it, had seen a flight of students to the new applied environmental engineering and mining bachelor degrees in TAFE, which have 98% employment outcomes.

Nursing, Medicine and Allied Health weren’t wanting for students but the struggle for clinical placements has become so acute since the private Medical and Health Science College, an offshoot of our old and trusted partner Hong Kong Baptist University, was built near Campbelltown that the University had had to go into a private-public venture to build its own hospital to train its students. It was almost viable till the partner defaulted on its loan and was placed in the hands of receivers. The social science and humanities schools used to be confident in the drawing power of their courses, but were bewildered by the speed of the much discussed ULC (University Load Crisis) as a result of aggressive marketing by the distance education universities. Several had followed UNE’s lead in recognising Greater Western Sydney as an uncolonised frontier and had opened shopfronts in Westfield Shopping Town, Penrith Plaza, Macquarie Square, Castle Towers and Rouse Hill Shopping Village.

The CEO of UWSCollege was startled to drive into Nirimba one morning and find “University of Phoenix” emblazoned on the front gates. It transpired the Minister had offered them co-location on this shared precinct in the interests of robust competition, a modest emolument, and, as she put it, “letting the market rip”. It appeared that the U.S. based, for-profit University of Phoenix signs were also going up on office blocks along the main roads all across Sydney, where drop-in learning centres for commuters were being established.

Both CEOs of the College and the Western Sydney Institute of TAFE were last seen going into the Dean of Business’ office with another bottle of the best, and the CFO was standing at Campbelltown in the empty foyer of the private hospital wondering if it could be turned into student residences.

The VC had deciphered the scratches on the wall and shortly thereafter announced he was taking up the position as Australian CEO of the American Ivy League consortium (called “East to West”) which had set up offices at Norwest in a joint education venture with the businesses there. Ivy OU was offering credentialed courses using sophisticated courseware, which had in any case been freely available on the web for almost 15 years. It offered a ‘construct-your-own-degree’ model with advertising images of a happy student holding a testamur, entitled “I did it my way.” TEQSA approved its bachelor and masters level credentials, based on the model of evening and weekend tutoring by business professionals in local high schools. It was widely believed that UWS academics were making a tidy sum moonlighting for the Ivy OU.

The Board of Trustees met about this time to consider a takeover bid by Sydney University of Technology (the recently merged Sydney University and UTS which joined forces to try to counter the threat of the UNSW/Macquarie merger). The merger, bankrolled by News Ltd. and S.U.T., was now run by Lachlan Murdoch who understood like no one else the power of scale, diversification and neutering the competition. Sydney University, like ANU and Monash, had never really recovered from the downturn in its international revenue in 2012 and the deep staff cuts and industrial ferment that followed. UTS on the other hand had resolutely pursued its professional educational mandate and kept enrolments steady and was welcomed by its much older cousin when it came offering salvation.

The greatest indignity in all of this was that I had been turfed out of the exquisitely restored and furnished Female Orphan School which I’d commandeered as my residence in perpetuity shortly before I retired.

Fanciful? Well, yes, just a tad. But there are already around 140 private providers offering degrees in Australia, and TAFE NSW has developed degree offerings in Early Childhood and Accounting. In time no doubt TAFE will develop other degrees and may do so with lower fees as well as the benefit of HECS-style loans. UWS and TAFE arguably have a good deal more in common than that which differentiates us, providing the grounds for a more robust partnership, drawing on our shared regional commitment and a long history of successful articulation arrangements. In a recent paper entitled “Higher Education and the Power of Choice”, Ernst & Young suggested that what they called Tier 2 universities (arguably us) with “weaker brands” and reputations will come under particular pressure in an increasingly competitive environment. Then there are the distance education providers such as Deakin, Charles Sturt, New England and Southern Queensland universities all of which have a presence in Western Sydney in the students they teach.
Charles Sturt, for instance, a well-established DEC (Distance Education Centre) before the Dawkins reforms of 1989-90, is the largest online and distance education provider in Australia and the largest of the regional universities. With 38,000 students and 10 campuses around NSW and ACT, and one in Canada, international study centres in Melbourne and Sydney and study centres with TAFE in several regional towns, 60% or over 20,000 (6,000 of whom live outside NSW) of its students are enrolled online or by distance. It is a partner in four CRCs and two ARC Centres of Excellence. It has over the last few years also invested heavily to establish veterinary and dental science courses and is looking to expand to medicine. Its research income grew by 175% between 2003 and 2010 from around $5 million to $15 million. Its income has doubled over the last five years and its student enrolment has increased by 30%, with a third of the total coming through TAFE-University pathways.

Until recently, the distance education presence of these former DECs was in homes and businesses where students live and work. But not long ago we learned that UNE had become a sponsor of the Parramatta Eels and was about to establish a satellite campus in the Parramatta CBD, where they are reportedly leasing up to 2,500 square metres not far from the railway station, apparently funded from a $36 million SAF grant, and ostensibly for delivery of distance education through state of the art technologies. By their account they have 2,000 primarily mature-aged students in western Sydney. These unheralded initiatives were particularly surprising as we had worked together to secure a SAF grant to make their distance education units available to our students in a collaborative partnership linking both universities.

And just up the road Notre Dame has very recently reached an agreement with Norwest partners to establish a business education campus in the Park. And CSU is offering its Master of Management with the Western Sydney Institute of TAFE through the joint CSU-TAFE NSW Graduate Management Consortium at the Institute’s ‘graduate wing’ at the Nirimba Campus.

And then there’s Open Universities Australia (OUA), owned by seven universities – Curtin University, Griffith University, Macquarie University, Monash University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and the University of South Australia – and affiliated with a further 14 Australian tertiary education providers. OUA has been operating since 1993. It offers flexible access to higher education through distance education, open, as they put it in their marketing materials, to anyone anywhere. It offers over 1,400 units and 170 qualifications online. Over 144,000 students have enrolled at OUA since its inception. OUA is marketing itself very aggressively as those of you who watch prime-time commercial television would know.

And as international student numbers falter across Australia the third international residential campus of the S.P. Jain School of Global Management will open at Homebush, built with a reported $40 million investment by a wealthy Indian businessman and catering to international students. It will offer them the experience of a year at each of the Dubai and Singapore campuses and two years in Sydney. While their student market at present is different from our own, they may well compete for teaching staff, and of course, their recruitment focus could change in the future; the provision of student accommodation will add to their attractiveness. The school ranks in the Financial Times top 100 business schools – only UNSW and Melbourne University in Australia also make the list.

South Australia is an interesting case of government inducements to attract private providers. The University of Adelaide and Kaplan have reportedly entered a joint venture after Kaplan tried unsuccessfully to secure registration as a university. Cranfield University, a defence-related institution in the U.K., opened a campus with much fanfare, and a commitment of $750,000 from the State government, but it has since closed. Carnegie Mellon is reputed to have received around $30 million from the State government but has just over 100 students, most of them local, especially State government employees, enrolled in postgraduate courses in public policy and management and in information technology. The prestigious University College London, looking to capitalise on the resources boom, has opened a School of Energy and Resources in collaboration with Santos and the State government and is offering a Masters degree in Energy and Resources Management. The International Laureate Universities group gained approval just before TEQSA came into existence to open Torrens University in 2013, an initiative promoted by a former Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, who were reportedly unable to secure permission for its establishment in Brisbane. Its stated aim is to be a legislated institution, with access to Fee-Help and a goal of 3,000 students in 10 years time.

A more remote but powerful development would be the entry of prestigious American institutions, such as MIT and Stanford, and the 250 other highly reputable institutions and organisations which have joined the Open Courseware Consortium, together sharing content from more than 1,700 courses, into online provision. MIT pioneered the open courseware movement and began putting all of its core teaching materials on the web 10 years ago and has already created MITx as an open-learning platform with low-cost certification of content mastery. In other words, MIT credentials (though not yet degrees) will be available to anyone, anywhere who is able to log in and pay.

We are not immune to inroads by all of these competitors in the Greater West, only overlooked – until now.

Alongside the gradual hybridisation of the higher education sector and amplifying the capacity and reach of those institutions able or agile enough to grasp their power, is the rapid innovation in and adoption of new telecommunications, social media, e-learning, e-curricula and other forms of flexible and distance education. The term often used to describe the impact of these kinds of ground-breaking new technologies and strategies is “disruptive innovation.”

An “alphabet soup of new online companies is emerging” for admissions advice, free open textbooks, social networks for education, life-skills education, online course and research organisation, language learning, scholarship matching, personalised degree planning and so on. Then there’s a company that builds expensive online courses for top tier American universities. The University of Southern California’s MA in Teaching which formerly had 81 students enrolled now has 25,000 online students11. In the U.S., Western Governors University, a not-for-profit online university, is reportedly growing at 30 to 40% each year. The start-up for-profit New Charter University is offering tuition so low that students don’t need loans ($199 a month for as many classes as they can finish in a term).

As one writer puts it12:

11 HEC, 6 Apr 2012
12 K Carey, New Republic, 13 Mar 2012
Phoenix University, a for-profit in the U.S, has a different model, with centralised curriculum development and quality assurance and convenient leased (and heavily branded) teaching spaces all over the nation. It targets mobile workers, as well as full-time students. Calling itself a university for working adults it offers vocationally focused studies up to PhD level through 265 learning centres, with 440,000 students and 25,000 instructors.

The U.K.’s Open University, of course, was the pioneer in the scale and quality of its offerings to anyone, anywhere in the U.K. and later in Europe and the Middle East either under license or in direct provision. The OU now has around 265,000 students, and it is highly ranked in the quality and impact of its research centres. They invest in skilled instructional designers and can afford to spend millions of dollars developing individual modules because, as they put it, they have industrial scale. The scholarship, creativity and architecture of their learning packages, combined with their far-flung network of tutors are second to none, OU has essentially decoupled content from the classical university experience, made it as widely available as possible, and added value through small scale decentralised tutoring and personal contact.

Underlying all of the innovations, trends, experiments and reforms that have intertwined and continually reshaped higher education over the years is one clear commonality – uncertainty. Five years ago we would not have anticipated deregulation of load allocations, or the present shape of ERA, or the strength of the dollar, or the boom (if not bubble) in online educators and students, calling itself a university for working adults it targets mobile workers, as well as full-time students. Calling itself a university for working adults it offers vocationally focused studies up to PhD level through 265 learning centres, with 440,000 students and 25,000 instructors.

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The single greatest asset held by traditional colleges and universities is their exclusive franchise for the production and scale of higher education credentials. In the last few months, however, that monopoly has begun to crumble. New organisations are being created to offer new kinds of degrees, in a manner and at a price that could completely disrupt the enduring college business model.

The emerging environment demands not incremental but disruptive changes that enable us to secure our place ahead of those from low income and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, and see reported student satisfaction soar.

The most enduring performers, we found, built their strategy on a few vivid, robust forms of differentiation that acted as a system, reinforcing one another.

The best way to grow is usually by replicating your strongest strategic advantage in new contexts.

As the trajectory of deregulation picks up speed, this will demand informed imagination and our ability to work together, to encourage critical debate, to understand and analyse the field of forces in which we operate, to borrow, invent or adapt strategies which others have pioneered, and to bring new ideas to bear on our programs: all these with commitment, enthusiasm and alacrity.

The emerging environment demands not incremental but fundamental changes that enable us to secure our place ahead of newcomers and competitors. The current uncertainty about political and tactical shifts in university policy and practice also demands that we remain flexible and agile, able to shift and adapt to whatever comes over the tertiary horizon.

13 Glyn Davis ‘The Republic of Learning’ Boyer Lectures 2010, p.115


15 Ibid., p.110
We need to pursue or build on several parallel streams of work that frame, develop, coordinate and manage new directions and reforms, bringing to the challenge determination and single mindedness and equal parts of creativity and rigour.

CONCLUSION
Last year, in relation to our plans for growth, I said:

Growth in resources, in size and in standing is in many ways an unassailable aspiration. But growth isn’t intrinsically good. Well managed it offers scale, opportunity and boasting rights. But it also presents some paradoxical challenges. It harbours risks and pitfalls. We need to recognise and understand these if we are to hand to future generations an institution that is robust, unburdened by onerous liabilities, respected and adaptable.

For all the promise of an expensive higher educational policy environment we mustn’t lose sight of the risks, competition and fluidity in our sector, where sustainable advantage stems as much from the ability to adapt rapidly as it does from offerings and resources.

What we didn’t, and perhaps couldn’t, predict were our colleague institutions acting out of character – Sydney University dropping its ATARs and taking in so many more students, and UNE establishing a beachhead in the Parramatta CBD, for instance. And no doubt we can expect more of the same or variations on these strategies or other innovations in times to come. Can we predict what they’ll be? No. Can we fend them off? No. Can we stem the tide of educational innovation of e-universities, or canny providers? No. So what can we do?

Several things.

In a phrase, we will become everyone’s university. (Everyone, that is, of university age). What are the impediments to this goal? One is the location and accessibility of our campuses and, associated with this, the woeful public transport systems in western Sydney. Another is the sheer diversity of our student body: workers, parents, first in family, the disabled, those with poor English or broken schooling, high achievers, school leavers, mature age and all combinations of these characteristics. Without belabouring the point, how easy is it for a single migrant mother and parent of young children working on the minimum wage to attend campus daily to train as a teacher? Or for a Sudanese refugee supporting himself and family in the CBD, a long commute and HECS debt to embark on a Masters degree? Or for a young lawyer with a new baby, a mortgage, full-time job in the Sydney CBD, a long commute and HECS debt to embark on a Masters degree? Or for a high school leaver who might not yet have the experience that the programs demand, and the students need.

For heuristic purposes UWS Online can be thought of as our seventh campus, but it is really a more sophisticated and structured capacity to offer courses in virtual mode, with well planned, convenient and creative personal contact and practical experience that the programs demand, and the students need. UWS Online would have all the attributes of a major project with builders, architects, designers, accountants, project managers and so on. It would be open 24 hours a day year round. Some students would choose to spend the greater part of their time there, others would move at will between UWS Online and a physical campus. The crucial criterion of success would be choice – the student’s freedom to choose the pace, location and blend of their studies.

Second, we would bar no one who aspired to a university education, invoking again the principle that the best predictor of success at university is success at university. The tyranny of the ATAR would give way to well structured and transparent educational options, educational triaging and guidance and support for students on the best pathway for them, be they joint offerings with TAFE, UWSCollege, conventional degree entrance, modularised offerings and credentials, e-learning, advanced study or other. Essentially we would offer for most disciplines the opportunity for anyone to pursue a degree, but we would take very seriously our duty to assess and accommodate all levels of preparedness and to work in partnership with other institutions holding the same ambition to ensure students succeed.

Third, we would hone and structure our messages to reach and capture the imagination of different audiences (or ‘market segments’) across diverse media platforms with originality, wit, accuracy, honesty and flair – in ways which inform, delight and influence.

Fourth, these three broad initiatives or programs of activity all speak to our long enunciated commitment to equity and excellence, but also require a more purposeful re-engineering of all of our programs, learning guides, assessment regimes, academic calendar, infrastructure and, most crucially, the staff skills and expertise to enable us to meet every student at their level of preparedness and need. This will be an exciting, frustrating, not to say expensive undertaking but one that will set UWS on a sustainable path for years to come. It would mean redirecting resources to build the new (virtual) campus and to innovate, borrow and adapt curricula and teaching models to suit our circumstances and those of our students.

We at UWS take well-placed pride in our collective commitment to the University’s mission and our ability to adapt and navigate any seas. We are entering a fast-flowing channel with some whirlpools and rapids but with a crew and craft that has proven their worth and skills in any waters.

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– Prof Janice Reid, 13 July 2011