

John McLaren

While Ian Baker identifies the problems of higher education in Melbourne's west, his proposals for a new university of technology fall far short of solving them. Worse, they continue the idea which has dogged the west since the beginnings of state education, that for some reason the workers do not need the same breadth and depth of education as other people, and can be fobbed off with some kind of narrowly specific and instrumental substitute. For years, educational administrators used this excuse to deny Footscray a high school; then they denied it a fully autonomous technical college; now it is being used to justify a narrow university of technology instead of the kind of fully fledged institution which has been established in Sydney, Brisbane and even Perth.

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The problem of the western suburbs is not a lack of skills and abilities, or of institutions to develop them. The problem is these institutions lack the resources and opportunities to develop fully their existing potential.

Contrary to what Ian Baker implies, the Western Institute and Footscray Institute of Technology already offer first-rate education in engineering, humanities, social and physical sciences, computing and some areas of business.

These institutions do not need another institution, university or otherwise, to complement their work. They do need the opportunity to utilise fully their skills and knowledge, and their understanding of the culture and needs of the communities

they serve. They need the opportunity to offer their students postgraduate education. They need the opportunity, given to universities, to develop their own courses and the skills and knowledge available to the community through both pure and applied research conducted by their own staff with their own facilities.

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The first and most urgently needed facility is an adequate academic library able to support the existing institutions. The second is a computer network able to provide all staff and students access to national and international systems. The third is the complete upgrading of the specialist technology in engineering and science faculties. The establishment of a new university is likely only to delay the provision of such urgently-needed facilities. They require government money, not promises.

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The existing institutions, particularly in combination with RMIT but if necessary alone, already have the skills to service the emerging industries which Baker identifies in engineering, chemicals, food processing and information technology. Perhaps more importantly, they have the knowledge, through their work in applied chemistry, urban studies and Australian studies, to prevent the kind <sup>of</sup> social and environmental disasters which previous industrial development and human neglect have brought to the west.

The importance of a university is that it does not merely dance to the tune of government and industry, but provides independent evaluation and critique of the economy and society. A tertiary education should not merely teach people how to make

money. It should develop their ability to live usefully and in harmony with themselves and the environment. It must be as broad as it is deep.

A university of technology formed from an amalgamation of existing institutions in the west would not need to be in tutelage to anybody. The Western Institute and Footscray Institute of Technology have already developed courses which meet the needs of a society challenged and changed by developing technology. They do not need to be held back by the application of models found suitable in the eastern suburbs, nor do they want relegation to second-rate status.

Both institutions already have programs linked to the schools and designed to encourage women to take up studies in mathematics and science. But these are not enough. We need also to encourage men back into the arts and humanities.

The present imbalance between men and women in their choice of careers ensures not only that men dominate the economy, but that the cultures of business and industry are brutally masculine. For women to succeed they must conform to the same pattern. The consequence is the rape of the environment, human and natural, which is all too evident in the western suburbs and beyond.

We need not so much more people particularly women, specializing in science and technology as more science and technology for everyone. This means more technology in humanities courses, more humanity in technological courses, and a better balance of women and men in all of them.

The tertiary institutions in the west are already developing in these directions. They do not need a new institution, but recognition and support for what they can do. A new university of technology, certainly, but by amalgamation and development, not by imposition. We will be happy to work with any other institution to this end, but we do not need any newcomers.

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