

Colleges, Culture & Change:

Reflecting on the 2018 University Colleges Australia Forum

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Setting the agenda

Reflection on culture – the elusive cocktail of social behaviour, customs and ideas both valued and exhibited by particular groups – has been exceedingly comprehensive in Australia over the past twelve months. One royal commission cast light upon the disturbing ways greed can manifest in the finance sector, and another upon the failure of institutions to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse. All the while, the global Me Too movement challenged exemptions from the law – and community standards – exploited by men in positions of power. Fitting into this patchwork of probes are media-driven critiques of campus – including college – culture. *Colleges, culture* and *change* were thus suitable topics for the 2018 University Colleges Australia (UCA) Forum to explore.

Any chance of this year's UCA Forum becoming an echo chamber – a place for members to assert the value of residential colleges and congratulate one another on many unquestionably fine achievements – was eradicated by three strong external voices. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Tasmania, Professor Rufus Black, opened the Forum with a stimulating keynote address that poked and prodded traditional conceptions of the role of colleges. The Forum later heard from Australia's longest-serving Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick AO, and the Governor of Tasmania, Professor Kate Warner AC. Both speakers challenged college leaders to hold up the mirror and tackle society-wide socio-cultural issues as they manifest in college life.

The three addresses took the pulse on college culture, posited ways of addressing cultural issues, and considered what role colleges should seek to play in the 21st century. The ideas proffered by Professor Black, Ms Broderick and Professor Warner have set the agenda for colleges – as well as UCA – over the next twelve months.

Is cultural change required?

The speaker perhaps best-positioned to outline the state of college culture is Elizabeth Broderick, Australia's longest-serving Sex Discrimination Commissioner, whose organisation recently completed an extensive review of the six residential colleges within the University of Sydney. The goal of the

review was to ensure that these institutions become places in which all members, irrespective of gender, sexuality or other identity factors, can enjoy uncurtailed respect, dignity and equality. Ms Broderick's findings revealed that while the majority of students have an overwhelmingly positive experience at college, there are issues the Australian intercollegiate community must respond to.

Ms Broderick began her address by quoting an anonymous participant in her review: 'College is inclusive if you are included'. These communities, she continued, contain remnants of homophobia, unnecessary hierarchy that fractures community, and sexual violence. Another issue considered closely was alcohol and its effects on student life. 'Where I see problems,' Ms Broderick remarked, 'I see alcohol.' She added, however, that the substance is not the cause of problems, but a correlated factor (or, one might say, an 'amplifier' of more fundamental issues such as gender power imbalances). This view is shared by University of NSW Professor of Law Andrea Durbach, who when speaking with the UCA's Respectful Relations Response & Resources Advisory Group, described alcohol as 'an enabler for the perpetrator and a disabler for a victim'. Pre-empting the rebuttal that students often consent to participate in activities viewed by her report as problematic (such as excessive alcohol consumption), Ms Broderick offered the Forum a poignant remark to ponder: 'social pressure reduces choice.'

The Governor of Tasmania, Professor Kate Warner, grouped core issues into two categories: 'sexual assault, harassment and misogynistic practices on campus', and 'vulgar, violent, dangerous and humiliating initiation practices which college freshers can be subjected to'. She reminded heads of colleges that the problem faced is 'a broader one than toxic college cultures; it is the general cultural support for hypermasculinity in society which underlies sexual assault which college life can normalise and magnify instead of challenging'. Whatever the cause and scale of the problem, it was made abundantly clear by both Ms Broderick and Professor Warner that cultural change is required.

How should cultural issues be addressed?

The speakers were also in agreement that colleges have an extraordinary opportunity and capacity to address the aforementioned deep-seated social issues as they manifest in college life. 'You have both a captive audience and, in your students, wonderful material to work with,' the Governor remarked with a warm smile.

After affirming various specific recommendations in Elizabeth Broderick's report – for example, 'evidence-based education and awareness programs around gender relationships, sexual ethics and healthy and respectful relationships' – Professor Warner grappled with a topical question: whether

hazing should be criminalised. Drawing upon knowledge acquired over the course of a long and distinguished career as an academic criminal lawyer, Professor Warner made a case for the negative. She began by noting that criminalising particularly sinister forms of hazing, as recommended by the Red Zone Report, would cast a shadow over other types of hazing, and that many of the issues that must be addressed do not technically qualify as ‘hazing’ (for example, the practice of rating women’s sexual attractiveness on Facebook). Moreover, the difficulties of delineating the boundaries of criminal and non-criminal conduct would be highly challenging. Underpinning these remarks was a more general concern: law reform is often tokenistic, serving as a way of ‘being seen to deal with a social problem without effectively doing so’. In sum, Professor Warner believes that the existing criminal law can adequately deal with severe forms of hazing, while non-legal strategies must be implemented to address residual forms of hazing.

On the subject of how to effect change, Ms Broderick implored heads of colleges to take heed of a principle more crucial than any of the 23 recommendations contained within her reports: ‘change relies on courageous leadership’. Indeed, though review processes are cathartic and rewarding, they alone are not sufficient. ‘Cultural change will not occur,’ she argued, ‘unless leaders are willing to implement the reform required.’ This point was echoed by Professor Rufus Black, the former Master of Ormond College and current Vice Chancellor of the University of Tasmania, who noted that if college councils are serious about cultural change, they must be willing to run their colleges at half capacity (that is, only accept students who exemplify the ethos of the college, even if the financial implications of this commitment are undesirable).

Professor Black shared a few other thoughts on the subject of change. He cautioned against enabling intercollegiate rivalry to impede frank and open conversations about sexual assault and other issues prevalent within colleges; after all, conversation and openness are prerequisites to positive change. The Vice Chancellor also recognised that not all issues can be eradicated. ‘Things will continue to go wrong,’ he admitted. One might be tempted to put words in the Vice Chancellor’s mouth and add that the price of eliminating all forms of risk – of regulating student life to the extent that freedom would be nominal – would be a destructive and ineffective approach to combatting the unfavourable elements of college culture. Finally, Professor Black expressed preference for values-based communities that assess conduct against principles (for example, being committed to protecting the interests of all individuals, including ‘lost sheep’) rather than statutes and codes.

What should colleges seek to offer in the future?

The 2018 UCA Forum also provided a platform to consider what colleges should seek to do once major changes have been successfully implemented (which is not to suggest that institutions can ever ‘complete’ cultural change). This topic was the central concern of Professor Black, who has an uncanny connection to colleges, having spent all but five years of his adult life residing in them. He began by presenting a conceptual issue for colleges to grapple with: it is difficult to differentiate the role universities and colleges play in the development of students. Notably, Rhodes scholars are often ‘claimed’ as institutional successes by both universities and residential colleges.

In responding to, and perhaps subtly rebutting, the proposition that ‘colleges don’t matter that much’, Professor Black identified four opportunities for colleges to assert their relevance. Firstly, colleges must help attract excellent students to universities. This may involve agreeing to provide accommodation for winners of university scholarships. Secondly, colleges must provide equity scholarships to help counteract disadvantage faced by students. A notable example is many residential colleges are well-placed to alleviate financial burdens that hinder educational opportunities. Thirdly, colleges must lead programs such as pathway courses. A notable example is the University of Melbourne’s Bachelor of Arts (Extended) program, which enables students to complete a first year of Foundation Studies taught by Trinity College before progressing the University of Melbourne Bachelor of Arts. Ormond College’s Wade Institute of Entrepreneurship also comes to mind. And fourthly, colleges must fill the gaps of university life on a larger scale. In other words, colleges must expand their capacity so that more university students can enjoy the fruits of collegiate life.

Professor Black’s thesis was, put bluntly, that colleges should be strategic assets for universities. A question remaining, and one that the Vice Chancellor only dealt with subtly on this occasion, is whether this proposed relationship is compatible with ideological tension between universities and colleges. What if, for example, a university seeks to implement mandatory sexual assault reporting mechanisms that a college feels might infringe a victim’s right to confidentiality? Perhaps the Vice Chancellor might have responded, had he been pressed, that colleges should seek to master the art of compromise.

Key principles

Professor Black, Ms Broderick and Professor Warner each provided a suite of challenges for college heads to grapple with over the next twelve months. The principles below, extracted from their addresses, provide a starting point for what will be a challenging process of reflection and change.

1. Recognise that colleges are not as inclusive as they ought to be – they are, rather, ‘inclusive if you are included’
2. Recognise that alcohol can be an ‘enabler’ of sexual violence and other misconduct (as distinct from ‘the cause’)
3. When grappling with cultural issues such as sexual violence, bear in mind that such issues are not unique to individual colleges, but deep-seated socio-cultural ones
4. Hazing should not be criminalized, but addressed non-legally (see, for example, recommendations contained within Elizabeth Broderick’s reports)
5. Change relies on courageous leadership, which may extend to running colleges half-empty if need be
6. Competition must not impede collaboration between colleges, particularly when that collaboration is necessary to understanding and combatting sexual violence and hazing
7. Colleges must help universities attract excellent students
8. Colleges must alleviate social inequality by offering support to students demonstrating financial need
9. Colleges must lead programs that meet the demands of the tertiary education landscape, particularly when universities cannot meet these demands alone
10. Colleges must provide greater access to collegiate life by expanding their capacity