

At the Crossroads: How a Crisis in Tertiary Education Presents an Opportunity for ReCountrying the Australian Education System

Benny Wilson
University of Technology Sydney

Where to now?

We are at a crossroads of education in Australia.

Before the spectre of COVID reared its head over Australian shores, forcing academic research, PhD studies, and undergraduate and postgraduate courses to rapidly pivot or suspend core business models, Australian university enrolments, success, and efficacy were all on a fairly steady incline (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025). Indeed, even post the COVID pandemic, tertiary education remains the biggest services export in Australia; if one removes mining, then tertiary education is Australia's biggest export of the past decade (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025). However, recent policy changes by the Albanese government have led to universities being under a threat like they have rarely experienced in Australian history.

From the mid 1980s to the late 1990s, international students—a mainstay of Australian tertiary education since the mid 1800s (Norton, 2024)—and their enrolment in Australian universities were reimagined into an extremely lucrative industry. Through opening the market to full fee students and linking study in Australia to migration, successive Australian governments dramatically incentivised universities to open their doors to overseas students. In Australia, the total number of overseas enrolments is a fraction of domestic enrolments (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025). However, international students' significantly higher tuition fees—which are in turn used to fund research activities—mean that the sector in Australia has become increasingly reliant on international student enrolments.

From almost its first day in office in 2022, recognising the devastating impact that COVID had wrought on Australian universities, the Albanese government immediately set about attempting to right the ship. The government issued almost 500,000 student visas and while it did reimpose a cap on student working hours that the previous government had lifted, the new cap granted an extra eight hours per week on top of the previous cap (Norton, 2024). In 2023, however, the Albanese government pivoted away from supporting international higher education. While the reasons for this might be mixed, the fact remains that they are varied and numerous enough that the overall reduction of support for the sector seems to have broad bipartisan appeal. Several policy proposals (such as the cap on international student numbers, increased costs, and difficulty to obtain a student visa) have passed parliament with the support of the Coalition. This means that the days of Australian university reliance on international money are almost certainly over.

At this juncture, it is important to acknowledge that, while a large and powerful economic export, domestic student satisfaction with the university experience had been on the decline for some time but has peaked recently. A YouGov survey of over 1,200 Australian tertiary students concluded that over 40% of students are dissatisfied or neutral about their overall education experience (Studiosity, 2024). The survey suggests some factors which have impacted on student satisfaction include the move to online teaching and its detrimental effect on campus life, the increased cost of living and financial pressures making more immediate employment post-school significantly more attractive and necessary than it has been for previous generations, and the student HELP debt doubling on average since 2008.

And so, as I said, we find ourselves at a crossroads for education in Australia. The gauntlet has been thrown down by the Australian government and domestic students alike and it is now up to us as tertiary educators to respond with innovation and insight. It is, no doubt, a daunting task. However, in this crucible of uncertainty and significant hardship for the sector may very well be formed a new jewel—an answer to an education crisis that we as universities have been trying to address for some time. In this opinion piece I propose that if higher education is going to look so radically different moving into the future, perhaps we can build a better university system by focusing on a wisdom and knowledge system much further back in Australia's history.

What an Australian education is, and what it can be...

While COVID and student numbers are undoubtedly strong drivers in the change to Australian education, it is important to acknowledge that this is merely representative of a rapidly changing world, one affected by numerous interrelated political, technological, and social changes. In fact, one might see the response of Australian universities to this change as not an “Australian” issue at all, but merely how one nation might respond to more global trends and evolutions. What I find hugely compelling, however, is the opportunity that these unique circumstances create to refocus Australian universities through cultural capability practices on highly relational, interconnected, Indigenist, and Country-based forms of instruction.

The most recently stated purpose of the Australian education system is to ensure Australia's international competitiveness and economic viability (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2023). These espoused values have been critiqued by educators exploring the prevalence of neoliberal ideology in Australian education (Lingard, 2018) and by researchers seeking to understand how the education system promulgates and reifies a deficit discourse around cultural groups (Fforde et al., 2013; Gorringer et al., 2011; Vass, 2012). Most significantly for the purposes of this opinion piece, these values have been critiqued by Indigenous educators seeking to remake the education system in an image more consistent with the sustainable practices of Indigenous people (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020; McKnight, 2015, 2016; Spillman et al., 2023; Wilson & Spillman, 2022). Regarding ACARA's stated purpose, the actions (or inaction) of the Albanese government are going to cause significant pain and trepidation for the tertiary sector for years to come. However, the very conditions that such uncertainty creates necessitates a complete overhaul of the way we ‘do’ tertiary education in Australia, and presents us with an intriguing opportunity.

For thousands of years pre-colonisation, education in this Country was place-based. It was facilitated by family members (often grandparents) and taught students that the most important thing they could do with their lives was to live in relational reciprocity with their environment. This education system led to a society that thrived sustainably for at least 60,000 years, and almost certainly much longer (Skuthorpe & Sveiby, 2006). While the exploitation of natural resources was light in this society and modern creature comforts were not available, it would be a mistake to think that Indigenous Australia pre-colonisation was a harsh and difficult place to live. Skuthorpe and Sveiby (2006), Pascoe (2014), and Gammage (2012) all use primary sources and stories from Indigenous people to paint a picture of a pre-colonial Australia that was extremely comfortable, if not outright utopic. In fact, Gammage (2012) offers a view of the Australian ‘wilderness’ where early settlers describe what they see as “the most magnificent and well managed parkland of any we have seen in England” (p. 132). Compare this to a modern Australian society that has an education system only some 150 years old, where there are increasing levels of anxiety and depression among the human populace (Kimmerer, 2013; Suzuki, 2007). More and more of our natural flora and fauna are struggling to survive or are dying out (Suzuki, 2007) and human impacts upon the environment

have wrought deep and lasting damage to the natural environment, such as the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef.

In light of this comparison, one must ask oneself what is so ‘good’ about the current education system—the one that the Albanese government’s policy decisions are forcing us to rethink and redesign? Put more starkly, in the words of Aboriginal activist and founder of IndigenousX, Luke Pearson:

You’d think that a society struggling with questions of sustainability would realise they have something to gain from the knowledge of a culture that wrote the book on sustainability ... particularly when that culture exists in the same bloody Country that they live in! (personal communication, April 12, 2019)

It is not practical or even useful to suggest that we could create the kind of wholesale, immediate change that would be representative of a return to pre-colonisation schooling. However, it is certainly attainable to utilise education systems to bring practices back into mainstream education that embrace the centrality of Country to human existence.

A profoundly Indigenous way of being

An investigation of embedding Country-based practices into Australian schooling, called Country as Teacher, is already being carried out in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions across Canberra and in parts of New South Wales (Spillman et al., 2023; Spillman & Wilson, 2024; Wilson & Spillman 2022). From 2021, researchers and cultural practitioners operating out of the University of Canberra worked with schools across the ACT, “reinvigorating Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogy in schools, with a long-term goal of rebalancing school-based education in Australia” (Spillman & Wilson, 2024, p. 80). The project works with classroom teachers to have deep and embodied experiences with Country. Teachers then use these experiences to reshape their classrooms and create new and authentic learning experiences for their students through rewriting the curriculum (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020).

The genesis of Country as Teacher pedagogy comes from the teachings of Damu Paul Gordon, who encourages us to accept the Indigenous belief that “all we are is a story” (Callaghan & Gordon, 2014, p. 5). Damu Paul suggests that every child in Australia is a story, has a story, and has the right to be born into the ‘right’ story. This is a story of obligation, responsibility, and deep and abiding connection with Mother Earth. Indigenous scholars from across Australia and the globe echo this wisdom with slightly different meditations on the same theme (e.g., Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Kimmerer, 2013; McKnight, 2015, 2016; Milroy & Milroy, 2008; Pascoe, 2014). To assist with this process, the research utilises the 6Ls, a pedagogical framework which prioritises personal experience and reflection over abstract learning. Some participants also engaged with Dadirri, an Indigenous meditative practice explained by Auntie Miriam-Rose Ungumerr that focuses on accepting oneself as an extension of the earth organism, rather than as an individual.

The process of relating with Country first requires participants to spend sustained periods of time on Country, weaving their own story into the story of the place they inhabit. While participants reported varying levels of difficulty and success with this, they also reported that after making the practice a habit, they felt they were able to ‘let go’, ‘breathe’, and engage with centres of knowing that they did not realise they had let become dormant (Spillman et al., 2023) Spillman & Wilson 2024). An exploration of how these experiences impact upon their classrooms and students is currently underway, with publications forthcoming through 2025 and 2026.

While this research focuses on teaching staff in schools and universities, it is also worthwhile to consider how our colleagues working in professional roles in universities would be crucial to carrying these ideas forward. While academic staff are at the forefront of teaching and learning, the professional staff who offer pastoral, administrative, and technological support for students must also embrace this way of knowing if we are to truly move forward as a movement. As such, it is crucial that a ‘Country as Teacher’ approach in a university supports the training and inclusion of all university staff, especially those who work in student services. This means meaningful and sustained investment in the relevant professional development of these staff members to the same extent that universities would invest in academic teaching staff.

This is quite obviously a radical and significant departure from the way that schools and universities utilise Indigenous knowledge at present. This is almost always about attracting and supporting Indigenous people to take their rightful place within the education system, whether it be at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level. The intention of this opinion piece is not to degrade or criticise these efforts, which are both important and valuable. Rather, this paper seeks to point out that if this is the most significant thing we, as a collective of tertiary educators, can think to do with Indigenous knowledge at a time where government policy is forcing us to rethink what is unique, significant, and valuable about an Australian tertiary education, then perhaps we are not worthy to be at the forefront of intellectual thought in the Country.

The challenge is not complex, it is about courage...

At this crossroads, we are being given an opportunity—to rethink what education in Australia looks like moving into the future. We know that this is now a conversation of necessity rather than one that we can have at our intellectual leisure, as the economic realities of keeping tertiary education viable in Australia are now stark. We need to rely less on international student numbers and rethink teaching and learning in our institutions to create a better, more sustainable future for Australian citizens.

Perhaps the unprecedented and hugely traumatic events of the past five years are just the catalyst that was needed to spur us into the conversations about creating this more hopeful, sustainable future based on Indigenous ways of knowing. However, such conversations will not be without their challenges. I would posit that foremost among these is the illusion of complexity in accepting a new paradigm for Australian schooling. Whenever urgent and lasting change is required, there will always be a general trend towards conservatism as the powerbrokers and gatekeepers of the previous system attempt to cling to old patterns and practices. The question of whether or not we should embrace a Country-centric education system in a Country—indeed a planet—that is struggling to remain sustainable is not a complex one. Rather, it is one that requires courage to shed the relatively recent yet demonstrably harmful and disabling ways of knowing, and return to a philosophy that built the world’s first truly sustainable society.

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The author may be contacted via:

Benny Wilson — benny.wilson@uts.edu.au

Please cite this paper as:

Wilson, B. (2025). At the crossroads: How a crisis in tertiary education presents an opportunity for reCountrying the Australian education system. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 33(1), 4–9.
<https://doi.org/10.30688/janzssa.2025-1-08>



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