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Trump Factor Likely to Score Low

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The President may have trouble keeping campaign promises

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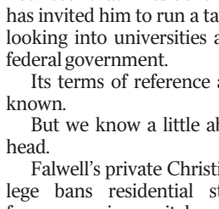

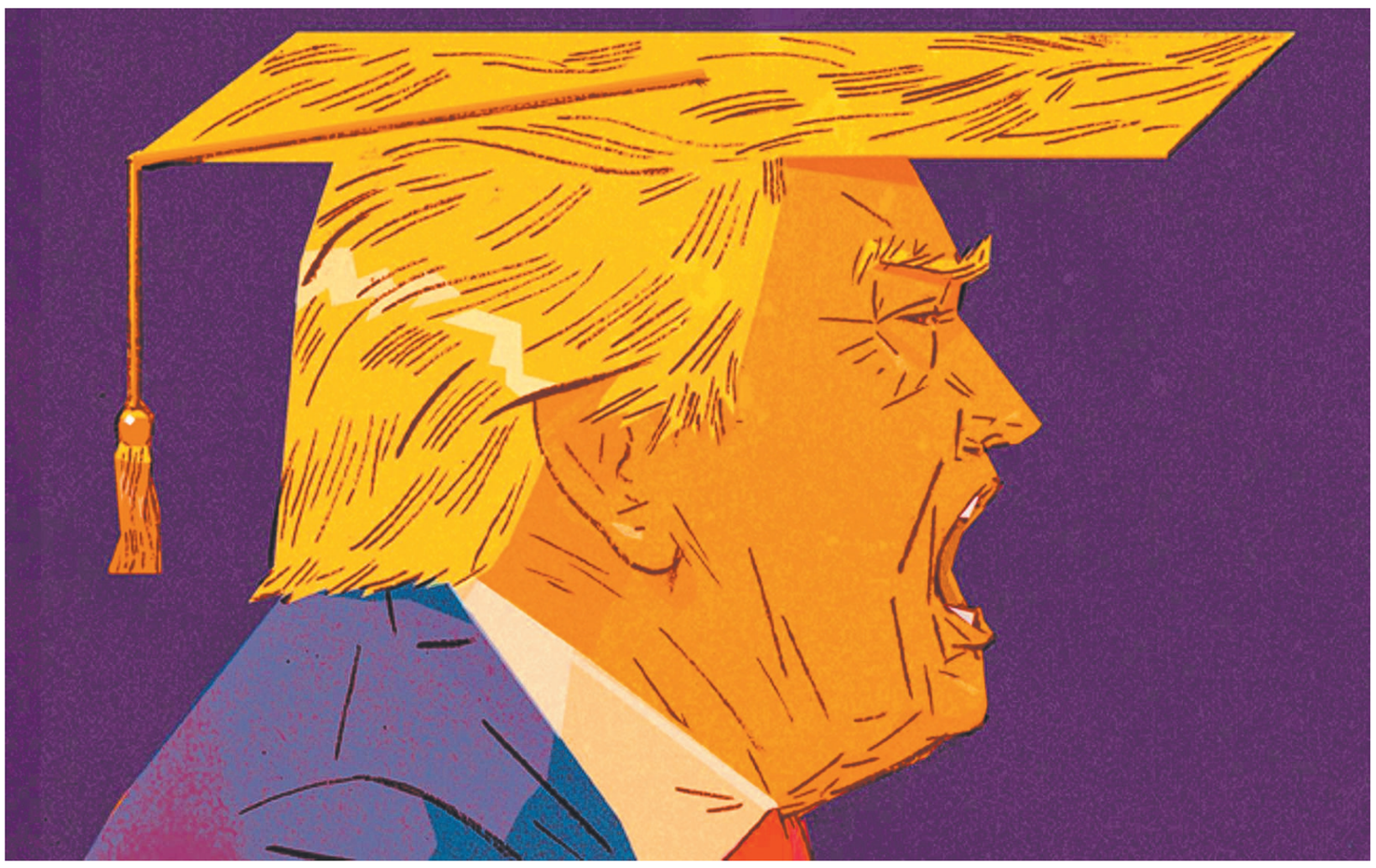

As Donald Trump's whirlwind approach to governing continues, following the cavalier example of Gough Whitlam and Lance Barnard's two-man cabinet after the 1972 Australian election, will the orange mogul have as dramatic an impact on higher education as his Canberra counterpart?

Guessing how Trump will conduct himself is both easy and difficult.

It is easy because he is mostly doing what he promised during the general election.

But it is difficult because he doesn't know how to achieve these things, due to a poor grasp of the US constitution, the division of powers, and making and implementing policy.

In addition, because Trump deems any obstacle to be a personal affront, he can alienate participants, observers, opponents and even supporters through his oleaginous solipsism and infantile rage.

But we have some clues as to future directions that he might take.

The president of Liberty University, Jerry L. Falwell, Jr, has announced that President Trump has invited him to run a taskforce looking into universities and the federal government.

Its terms of reference are unknown.

But we know a little about its head.

Falwell's private Christian college bans residential students from swearing, witchcraft and watching R-rated films. Some exceptions are made to the latter prohibition; *American Sniper* is kosher.

The university avows that "Angels were created as ministering agents, though some, under the leadership of Satan, fell from their sinless state to become agents of evil. The universe was created in six historical days and is continuously sustained by God."

> The federal government is important in financing research and providing student loans, but is in no position to create national policy on the price of tuition in private or public colleges

In 2015, Falwell advised Liberty students to buy guns and thereby "end those Muslims before they walked in".

As we await the fruits of this taskforce, we can only trust that angelic guides send it in the right direction, as far from devilish temptation as possible.

In terms of Trump's own pronouncements, during last year's campaign he undertook to work with the US congress "to ensure universities are making a good-faith effort to reduce the cost of college and student debt in exchange for the federal tax breaks and tax dollars".

He also promised that "to attend a two or four-year college, or to pursue a trade or a skill set through vocational and technical education, will be easier to access, pay for, and finish".

These admittedly admirable desires may be difficult to achieve.

As in Australia, education is constitutionally a matter for the states.

The federal government is important in financing research and providing student loans, but is in no position to create national policy on the price of tuition in private or public colleges.

During the election, Trump also shared his concern that universities had become places of "extreme censorship" rather than "spirited debate".

He vowed to "end the political correctness and foster free and respectful dialogue". No doubt of the kind that he himself models so dutifully.

Last week, the University of California at Berkeley cancelled a talk by a visitor after nonviolent protests against him by students were overtaken by violent non-students in a terrifying, fiery rampage.

Trump immediately threatened to end federal support of the campus on free-speech grounds.

How he would do so is unclear, because the courts generally do not endorse the state requiring colleges to comply with actions that were not specified at the time that money was voted to them.

Then there is the question of the incidental fallout experienced by higher education as a consequence of Trump's other policies.

We have already learned that his attempt to ban entry to the US by people from certain predominantly Muslim countries is wreaking havoc with scholars and students from banned nations, not to mention the country's standing as a world leader in research.

But what of his desire to complete a massive wall on the nation's border with Mexico?

Construction began 10 years ago, and already covers 1130km.

Its completion could have dire consequences for the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley, many of whose 26,000 students commute each day, with relative ease, from assorted Mexican cities. What will become of their enrolment if they are questioned each day, put under surveillance, or required to spend vast amounts of time in the naughty corner?

Finally, lest any of this concern readers, we should recall that Trump has previous experience as a college administrator — the first president with that profile since Dwight Eisenhower, who ran Columbia University.

From 2005 to 2010, approximately 10,000 people enrolled in Trump University to learn about real estate.

The university quickly inspired class-action lawsuits by its students, who claimed they had been defrauded.

Trump recently paid his accusers $25 million.

Perhaps he was guided by angels, soaring down from Liberty University and flapping their wings as he opened his chequebook, wiped the sweat from his emergent brow, and prepared to pen another tweet.

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Sector-wide backing kept us world-class

Australia will lag without support for innovation

SALLY KIFT

February is a particularly exciting time. It's when tens of thousands of new students make their eager way on to our campuses and through our online portals to join more than one million later-year peers.

These are good times. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development data tells us that the public benefits of higher education outstrip the private benefits. Across the OECD, both the private and public returns exceed its private and public costs. Good news indeed.

It seems that Australian higher education is living and delivering the dream: for students, their families, society and government. The return on public, and increasingly private, investment is indisputable. As we know, higher education also transforms lives. It is quite obviously one of the most efficient mechanisms we have for social mobility.

This year our commencing students are rich in diversity. They are young and mature-aged, rich and poor, indigenous and not.

Many will still be the first in their family to attend university. Some will have disabilities. Some will have travelled great distances from their international, regional or remote homes, often at great personal or family expense.

So here's the thing.

While all the objective indicators point to a world-class education system and a positive, highly regarded student experience for our diverse cohorts, that high quality has not come about by happenstance.

Australian universities have benefited from almost two decades of bipartisan sector-wide investment in innovation and learning and teaching excellence.

This has been done via the Office for Learning and Teaching and its predecessors, the Carrick Institute and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

The OLT closed its doors in the middle of last year. I will not rehearse the merits of that decision. That has been done elsewhere.

What I will say is simply that sector-wide innovation in learning and teaching is fundamental to sustaining and enhancing Team Australia's higher education capacity, so we can continue to be a competitive player in an increasingly global education market.

As Universities Australia made clear last year, "Staying at the forefront of modern teaching and learning practices requires proper financial support."

In that light, it is pleasing to see various university groups move to fill the post-OLT void.

The Australian Technology Network has recently announced allocations for its learning and teaching grants.

The Innovative Research Universities has appointed an inaugural vice-chancellors' fellow to pursue enhancements in graduate success.

These initiatives are laudable and will obviously have impact within those networks' member institutions. However, they will not deliver the whole-of-sector uplift required to maintain our prime reputational positioning.

We won't fall behind this year and maybe not even the next, but inexorably we will start to lag.

In the face of endemic change and continual disruption, what remains at the heart of a world-class education system is excellence in learning and teaching and the relentless pursuit of whole-of-sector innovation.

Just take a quick look at what is happening overseas.

New Zealand's Tertiary Education Commission is currently funding the development of a capability framework to focus on improvements among providers and their funding.

In the UK, the Higher Education Academy is leveraging work done on retention in 2012 to fund another big push.

In Australia there is legitimate concern that without a whole-of-sector focus, a bygone reputation for educational excellence will count for little in the face of aggressive investment internationally and constant sector and technological disruption.

Sally Kift is deputy vice-chancellor (academic) at James Cook University.

Knowledge has suffered while we sleepwalked down the neoliberal path into a post-truth era

The academy has been reduced to a business model

SHARON BELL

Not very long ago many of us in the academy, thinking we were part of a social historical moment rather than neoliberal waves of change, were excited by the concept of university engagement.

The prospect of universities at the centre of the knowledge economy seemed such a positive shift. We looked forward to being immersed in the "agora" in partnership with other producers of knowledge and respectful of community "knowledges".

We embraced the projected movement away from the production of knowledge within academic disciplines towards the application of knowledge to specific problems in specific contexts.

Ironically the emergence of the concept of the post-truth era coincided with that of the articulation of the changing place of the academy in the knowledge economy.

Instead of following the proposed knowledge economy road map, it seems we were seduced by a utopian intellectual dream while sleepwalking into the future. With hindsight we can see that we should have been reflecting more seriously on the implications of the shift from intellectual coherence and communication of scientific certainty to the much more complex web that constitutes contemporary transdisciplinary knowledge. We should have asked: Who will be able to access this complex knowledge that lacks coherence and is increasingly contested? Who will be the trusted producers of knowledge? Who will be left out and what will the consequences be?

New knowledge production was also predicted to be socially distributed and continuously expanding, which seemed to offer boundless opportunities for agile institutions. We did not foresee how universities might be sidelined and the established hallmarks of institutional and expert credibility rendered unimportant or irrelevant. The provenance of knowledge produced and distributed through think tanks and social media is difficult to assess. But it is to these that governments are increasingly turning for "evidence" that suits their policy purpose. Meanwhile, we witness Twitter-generated policy and feedback loops that reinforce prejudices and cause significant harm to targeted groups.

With the wisdom of hindsight we should revisit Peter Drucker's reflections on the 20th century. We should have considered how the rise of knowledge workers and the displacement of industrial workers in the knowledge economy would play out in terms of rising social inequality and political disenfranchisement. Thomas Piketty gave us a great tome on the subject but did we regard his treatise as theory rather than practice?

With greater insight at a local level we might have been more aware of the impact of commodification and outsourcing of our operations. Such changes have significant impact in outer-metropolitan, rural and remote communities. There local producers and suppliers and local expertise may be bypassed for large corporate supply chains and the increasingly dominant metro-based consulting companies ready to sell anything from a new strategic plan to improved student retention.

> We need to reclaim our role as trusted public institutions that work with our communities to drive inclusion and create opportunities

One might be tempted to argue that this is the realisation of a neoliberal dream. But if universities are to retain relevance and a central role in the knowledge economy, is this commodification of every facet of our operations inevitable and what are the implications for engagement premised on public good?

Perhaps I am the only one who has been sleepwalking? Perhaps it was only I who failed to read the now clear messages generated by some higher education commentators and the critical literature on neoliberal policies and the rise of the entrepreneurial university over the past two decades? Perhaps not.

Universities are large and complex institutions made up of many and diverse subcultures and layers of governance that change differentially over time. They are not neoliberal juggernauts led by conservative conspirators. The change has not been revolutionary or reflective of a single major reform agenda. It has been incremental — one policy, funding and governance regime built upon another, until the sector that was once dominated by academic communities comes to resemble tribes of competing businesses. Businesses now kept alive by an army of contingent workers.

The overarching path universities in Australia have taken leads in one, neoliberal, direction. Institutional subcultures and a continuing commitment to equity and inclusion disguise this from unaware participants who read the symptoms clearly but remain uncertain of the drivers of change.

The emergence of a post-truth era in tandem with the pervasive impact of decades of neoliberal government policies demands reimagining what it means to be an engaged university. It demands that we acknowledge the lack of trust in the academy and the ambiguous messages we generate about our public-good role. It also demands that we be cognisant of the dramatically changed nature of our university communities in terms of the engagement of students and staff and our defining relationships with them. In an increasingly stratified sector and society these changing relationships have the potential to threaten our capacity to engage and to maintain the longevity of commitment for which we have historically been valued.

We as a sector need to seize the post-truth moment to reclaim our role as trusted public institutions that work with our communities to create opportunities and drive inclusion. Creating and selling a new product to a new client is unlikely to achieve this, even if beautifully packaged and promoted for easy access.

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