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# The University and the Law School

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Professor Dennis Gibson\*

The opening of the Queensland Institute of Technology (QIT) law school in 1977 began a subtle change in the direction of the institution that would only reach fruition in the multi-disciplinary, multi-campus university of today. Queensland University of Technology (QUT) can trace its origins as far back as the Brisbane School of Arts, founded in 1849, and set up to provide night classes in the humanities and practical arts for working people. But the dominant strain in QUT's 'predecessor' institutions was the applied science and engineering college which provided the model first for the Central Technology College (1908-64) and then for Queensland Institute of Technology (1965-89). The introduction of a law school was the beginning of a broadening of disciplinary boundaries at QIT, a broadening that contributed to the formation and development of QUT. QIT and the Sydney-based NSW Institute of Technology were the first non-university tertiary institutions in Australia to offer Bachelor of Laws courses. Symbolically, perhaps, the founding of the law school was the beginning of our march to university status.

While the law school contributed to a richer culture at the institution that housed it, the institution also affected the culture of the law school. From the beginning, QIT's courses in law were perceived as practical, oriented to the requirements of professional practice, and producing highly employable graduates. A recent meeting of vice-chancellors of the five Australian Technology Network universities (all descended from former state institutes of technology) came up with the following working definition of 'technology' in an attempt to encompass the extraordinary complexity of activity at these institutions: 'the application of creative thinking and ingenuity to the solution of definable and practical problems in all fields of human endeavour'. In its commitment to creativity and practical problem solving, law at QIT/QUT – first the school and then the faculty – has exemplified this broad 'technological' tradition.

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I recently did some work on the factors that influence the choices potential students make about universities and courses. The overwhelming weight of the research, both at QUT and elsewhere, is that the major factors are, first, the availability of professional courses with good employment outcomes, and second, the prestige of a university as a whole. The courses offered by the QIT and QUT law school have proved successful according to the first criterion; the very presence of these courses has advanced the institution's standing according to the second criterion. The QUT Bachelor of Laws degree has gained the reputation of being highly vocational in orientation and of achieving excellent graduate employment outcomes. In the 1997 edition of the *Good Universities Guide*, for example, QUT scored highly in employment rate of graduates and starting salary. At the same time, the presence of a law school has enhanced QUT's overall prestige.

The law school over the years has of course done a lot more than produce vocationally oriented professionals through its undergraduate programs. It has become a centre of intellectual activity. This journal, for example, published its first edition in 1985. The undergraduate law school is now part of a Faculty of Law which offers undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in justice studies and legal practice, and a suite of postgraduate and double degrees, as well as studies leading to professional accreditation in law. The faculty has also been one of the most successful in QUT in research as measured by publication rates.

The future for universities in Australia, like that for the legal profession itself, is the subject of vast speculation at the moment. After the completion of the deliberations of the Dearing Committee in Britain, we await the findings of the West Committee on funding and other policy issues in Australian higher education. In both countries, as indeed around the developed world, universities are moving to greater reliance on private funding as participation in higher education becomes the norm rather than the exception and as governments respond to budgetary pressures. Any future for universities is likely to involve allocation of resources to institutions more directly on the basis of student choice than has been the case in the past. In such a deregulated climate, professional faculties such as law will need to constantly prove their credentials in terms of graduate employability and the prestige of the institution of which they are part.

QUT's Faculty of Law is well placed to take advantage of these future opportunities. The faculty has also been outstanding in using emerging technology in teaching and learning. Examples include use of on-line facilities to search for relevant case law and the 'crimson parrot' interactive learning program for criminal law. I wish the Faculty of Law all the best in the future. It has become an important part of our university and I am sure it will continue to contribute to the development of QUT in the future.