

Prospective University Mergers in Western Australia: Comment

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The views expressed are fairly anodyne, nevertheless, it is perhaps useful to bear in mind they represent only those of the author and not that of, say, Senate or Academic Board. Further, it need hardly be said, Ray da Silva Rosa is the author of all errors and typos.

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Late in 2021, WA's Chief Scientist, Professor Peter Klinken, proposed a merger of the state's four public universities, noting that "it would create a super-institution that would immediately land in the top-50 global rankings and act as a major lure to attract world-class academics and international students". Explaining his motivation, Professor Klinken said, "I have a responsibility to provide advice to government about what is in the best interests of the state."¹

I discuss questions and issues related to Professor Klinken's proposal.

From whose perspective should we consider a merger?

The university has multiple stakeholders with different expectations and ideas of what the university is about and an undefined process for resolving competing views.² In contrast, a for-profit commercial entity has a clear basis for choosing between alternative courses of action and, importantly, a well-defined and accepted process for decision-making and changes of control. This difference has implications for the prospects of a merger taking place and being successful if it happens.

Edith Cowan University VC Steve Chapman's has noted that the Chief Scientist's proposal included very little about students, their experiences and, also pertinently, the role of a university.³ On the other hand, questions of what a university is for are perennially and fiercely contested.

There is no tractable way to resolve to everyone's satisfaction what a university should be about.⁴ Universities often respond to their strategic dilemma by making a general commitment to "excellence" or the aim to be "the best (Clotfelter, 1996, p.23). An example being UWA's "[commitment to achieve international excellence in all endeavours](#)".

Committing to excellence in everything is no help to decision-making because it offers no basis for prioritizing. This means those interested in a merger must: (a) decide their objectives for

¹ "[WA chief scientist pushes plan for 'super' university](#)" by Julie Hare *Australian Financial Review* 28 November 2021

² This is a point I have elaborated in "Explaining the University: A Perspective".

³ "[Merging WA's universities an 'appalling idea'](#)": ECU vice chancellor" by Lauren Pilat *Sydney Morning Herald* September 23, 2021

⁴ For example, Harvard University tops most lists of the world's best universities however it still fails its mission by some people's measures. For instance, in 2006, Harry Lewis, a distinguished Harvard professor and Dean of Harvard College from 1995 to 2003, published a critique of Harvard with the telling title Excellence Without A Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education More recently, the establishment of the University of Austin was announced and warmly welcomed by many prominent academics, including Larry Summers, a former president of Harvard, on the basis that existing "legacy" universities have failed to engage in the fearless search for truth.

UWA, (b) assess if the objectives will be advanced with a merger and, if so, (c) check that the objectives align with key stakeholders.⁵

In what follows, I elaborate on (a) to (c) and conclude with a suggested way forward.

UWA' s Misssion

UWA's mission is "to provide world-class education, research and community engagement for the advancement of the prosperity and welfare of our communities".

As mission statements go, UWA's is notable for its specification of utilitarian objectives at world-class standard.⁶ That said, "world-class" is hard to define. Some years back, it was said that, "no one knows what a world-class university is, and no one has figured out how to get one. Everyone, however, refers to the concept" (Altbach, 2003, p. 5).

The publication in 2003 of the first widely adopted university ranking system, the Academic Ranking of World Universities ([ARWU](#)), provided a definition by default. For many key stakeholders such as governments and students, "world-class" is what the now several ranking systems define them to be.⁷

The ranking systems cut the Gordian Knot of defining world-class by using empirically verifiable data, i.e., largely internationally recognised measures of research success in the hard sciences.

This has given substantial impetus to the emergence of the "global university", an institution that sees itself "transcending the boundaries of the nation-state, educating for global perspective and advancing the frontiers of knowledge worldwide" by engaging intensively in "hard sciences" research that increasingly requires greater team-work, greater investment in infrastructure, international partnerships, and strategies for world-wide recruitment of students and staff (Mohrman, Ma and Baker, 2008, p. 7).⁸

When we talk about becoming a "top fifty" university or say we need to grow enrolments, we implicitly have in mind some version of the "global university". In accepting these particular goals we effectively decide our objectives for UWA.

The point is important because becoming a global university entails prioritising particular goals of the institution, in particular research that gets counted in the ranking systems.

⁵ There is precedent for such an approach. Fred Alexander, in his extensive and impressive history of UWA's first fifty years, observes that the university's great champion and benefactor, Sir Winthrop Hackett, never allowed his enthusiasm to outstrip his judgement of what was practicable. The over-all result of this policy was that he and his friends were able, on each successive occasion, to command sufficient active supporters and to neutralise unconvinced potential opponents. When, therefore the University came into existence, it had the goodwill of most influential sections of the Western Australian community, even though it lacked positive support, or even appreciation of its problems, among more than a small minority" (1963, p. 33).

⁶ In contrast, the mission of the much-publicised new University of Austin in Texas (UATX) is "the fearless pursuit of truth". It's a noble cause but of limited use in guiding strategy. Indeed, it's far from obvious how UATX will be much different from existing universities (see Aaron Hanlon's (2021) critique "Have the founders of the University of Austin been in a classroom lately?").

⁷ In Australia, the three most commonly referenced are the ARWU, the QS World University Rankings, and the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings ("[Australian university rankings](#)" by *Study Australia*).

⁸ Consistent with this view, in 2005 *The Economist* ran a special report on "The Brains Business" wherein it was claimed that "the most significant development in higher education is the emergence of a super-league of global universities. This is revolutionary in the sense that these institutions regard the whole world as their stage, but also evolutionary in that they are still wedded to the ideal of a community of scholars who combine teaching with research" (Wooldridge, 2005).

It is also telling that, as noted by ECU VC Steve Chapman, student experience and teaching quality is noted mentioned as reason for merger.⁹ One possible reason is that to improve teaching quality as measured by, say, evaluations from students, graduates and [employers](#), it is not necessary to grow. Bond University has fewer than 5,000 students yet consistently ranks amongst the top three Australian universities on [student experience](#). Notre Dame and ECU also [rank highly](#).

The principal attraction of a merger – indeed one that is all but made explicit by Peter Klinken – is that a larger university, as defined by student enrolments, has more capacity to support the increasingly expensive research undertaken in the hard sciences that, in turn, delivers the improvement in ranking to sustain our claim to being “world-class”.

It’s worth noting that UWA’s arguably *de facto* decision to compete in what *The Economist* has dubbed “the super-league of global universities” (and all that this choice entails) is squarely in line with, *inter alia*, all members of the Go8 and Curtin.

It’s also consistent with the influential, albeit perhaps small, proportion of the West Australian population that has long seen UWA as a reflection of the state’s international standing.¹⁰

My points here are:

(a) In its institutional choices, UWA has implicitly decided the kind of university it wants to be – a university seeking international status that combines research and teaching but relies on largely hard science research to drive its standing. This ordering of priorities does not please everyone – it is less supportive of the arts and humanities and other disciplines, mainly in the “soft sciences”, that do not figure significantly in research rankings.

(b) The internal tensions and strains from UWA’s decision to become a “global research university” will continue, both here and at the other Go8 universities, whether or not we merge.¹¹ The strains are inevitable because stakeholders resist any ordering of priorities that do not favour them. More on this point further on.

(c) Given (a) the question of merger should be evaluated in terms of it being a relatively effective and efficient way to further UWA’s standing as a global research university without further impingement of other university goals, including provision of high-quality teaching.

I address (c) next.

Is merger a relatively effective and efficient way to further UWA’s global standing?

⁹ This is not uncommon. The authors of a paper, “Is education getting lost in university mergers?”, reviewed planning documents related to four mergers in Finnish higher education. They found little attention to educational issues from the mergers and more on administrative and research issues.(Ursin, Aittola, Henderson, and Välimaa, 2010).

¹⁰ The first point made in the (1910) royal commission report into the merits of founding of a university in WA was that “Western Australia is the only considerable member of the white dominions of the Crown without a University. Indeed, every civilised State in the world save our own can now boast of having some such help for its people ([Report of the Royal Commission on the establishment of a university](#), 1910, p. 13.). Buoyed by a sense of unbound possibilities, Thomas Walker, WA State Attorney-General and Minister for Education, urged fellow Senate members at the first meeting of UWA’s Senate in 1912, “to do things on a scale worthy of our great destiny!” (Alexander, *Campus at Crawley*, p.54).

¹¹ Salmi (2016) cautions "policy makers and university leaders must keep in mind the risk of harmful effects on teaching and learning quality because of the research emphasis of most excellence initiatives; reduced equality of opportunities for students from under-privileged groups as universities become more selective and diminished institutional diversity as all institutions strive to become world-class universities" (p. 18). The risk is heightened by university leaders tendency to refuse to acknowledge there is any trade-off notwithstanding numerous studies and much anecdotal evidence showing the risk (both studies and anecdotes available on request).

Economies of scale: The merits of larger size

One outcome of merger is, of course, larger size. Steve Chapman, ECU's VC, is reported to have said that it "was simplistic to equate size with quality, pointing to the world's best 25 universities, almost all of which have fewer than 30,000 students" (Hare, 2021).

Chapman's best 25 universities were not listed in the news report of his views. I "googled" the number of students in each of the top 25 universities in the [ARWU list for 2021](#) and counted eight with over 30,000 students. The largest was the University of Toronto (ARWU rank 24) with close to 62,000 students and an endowment of Can\$3.4 billion. The smallest was CalTech (ARWU rank 9) with fewer than 2,300 students and an endowment of US\$2.84 billion as at 2020.

So, it's true that a large student body is not essential to be a global research university. What *is* essential is funding.

Usher and Ramos (2018) review the finances of the top 200 ARWU universities and find that "all institutions in the top 50 or so have per-student funding of \$50,000 or more, but universities in the 51-200 range have much lower rates of funding" (p.25).

Usher and Ramos express funding on a per-student basis to facilitate comparisons across institutions of different size. Their per-student funding statistics aren't a measure of student fees because they include funds received from endowment income, research grants and other activities.

Where either or both endowment income and direct funding for research is substantial, as is the case for the US universities that predominate in the ranks of the ARWU top 50 institutions, there is no necessary link between size and ranking.

There *is* a link between number of enrolments and capacity to fund research in Australian universities because student fees are the principal source of funding for research. Larkins and Marshman (2020) estimate that \$3.52 billion (i.e., 57%) of the \$6.2 billion spent on research in 2018 by Australian universities was from international student fees.

Australian universities are world-class in diverting student fees to research to the point where Usher (2016) suggests other countries may wish to emulate them.¹²

The greatest scope for diversion of student fees to research comes from international students. There has been considerable discussion of the revenue risk from reliance on international students.

Some may believe the merger of WA universities will allow economies of scale that reduces reliance on the overseas market. This is unlikely.

There is far less "fat" in domestic student fees. It is more probable that a merged institution will use the predicted rise in its global ranking to attract more international students thereby increasing rather than reducing reliance on them.¹³

¹² Usher (2016) writes, "the alternative to raising more money in order to pursue world-class university status is to make universities more efficient and find more "margins" within the institutions that can be reinvested in research. It seems clear that Australian ARWU-universities have been doing exactly this for some years now, and governments around the world may want to look at the ways in which institutions there have found success" (p. 20). It seems other countries have taken note. Usher (2021) [reports](#) "as of 2019-20, fee income from international students was approaching 45% of all university fee income [earned by Canadian universities] COVID will have reduced that a bit, but it seems likely that [Canadian] universities will be receiving over half their fees from international students before 2025."

¹³ Indeed, WA Chief Scientist Peter Klinken claims "a united, single, high-profile genuinely world-class university ... [would] be a beacon for attracting the most talented students and academics" (Hare, 2021). This

Further, history indicates that in the event of a decline in the international revenue stream, research-intensive universities protect their research-intensive disciplines and make cuts in other areas. A merged university intensifies risk to non-research-intensive areas.

Finally, it's also worth pointing out that whilst much comment has been made about the risks inherent in relying on overseas students, in particular the Chinese market, far less attention has been given to the risks in relying on domestic students. The risk with domestic students doesn't lie in lack of demand – the demographics are good for the foreseeable future¹⁴ – but rather in Government policy on support of domestic students.¹⁵

A variety of ostensible pundits have been strident in claiming that Covid19 will force changes in universities' reliance on overseas students. The latest indicators are that, if anything, the overseas students, in particular the Chinese market, has proved more reliable than government policy.

Boucher and Choy (2021) used “AI-powered strategic market survey techniques” to gauge Chinese views on Australian universities. They report:

“Chinese sentiment to Australian education is almost entirely positive and this has improved since 2020. There are strong expectational cues among the Chinese for Australian education, which is a promising signal for Australia (despite the heated political discourse between Canberra and Beijing). They are waiting for borders to open and are ready to act, which provides a good basis to forecast a better-than-expected recovery of international student migration moving forward”.

Economies of scope: The importance of disciplinary mix

When it comes to rankings, not all disciplines are equal.¹⁶ It's fairly clear and nowhere disputed that science-heavy universities find it easier to run up the global rankings.

UC San Francisco is ranked at number 20 by the ARWU despite focusing solely on health science and having just 3,300 students (all postgraduates). The arguably more famous and prestigious Ivy League university, Dartmouth College, has an ARWU rank of 203 because it has less concentration in the sciences and attends mainly to undergraduate education.

Manchester University, a public research university that is the UK's third-largest by enrolment, arguably offers a more apt comparison with UWA. It has around 40,000 students, an endowment of about 220 million pounds (i.e., approx., Aus\$410 million) and an ARWU ranking of 35, i.e, well within the top 50.

view seems at odds with Klinken's reported view in the Briefing Issues paper that Covid19 has exposed the frailty of the current funding model's reliance on international students.

¹⁴ Parr (2015) writes that “Australia's universities should be planning to accommodate further growth in numbers of domestic student enrolments, in view of the projected 25% growth of the 18-24 years old population over the next 20 years. The projected growth is due to recent increases in births and high levels of immigration”.

¹⁵ For instance, Gareth Williams, Head of Policy Studies in the Institute of Education at the University of London, has written: “British universities have discovered since the 1980 that the instability of government funding can be even greater than that of the market-place” (p. 92). The Australian experience about the reliability of government funding is similar. Norton (2015) comments that the (Labor) Federal Government budget of 2013 included a “efficiency dividend” (i.e., a budget cut) from universities of 2 per cent that year and 1.25 per cent the following year. This prompted vice-chancellors to advocate fee deregulation despite their earlier reluctance. Norton claims “they [the Vice Chancellors] would still have preferred government support if only it wasn't so unreliable” (p. 27/28).

¹⁶ For instance, there aren't any HiCi researchers in the Arts and Humanities because research in these fields isn't covered by the ranking system used to identify HiCi researchers.

Note that Manchester enrolls fewer students than five of the Go8 universities and Curtin, although it is the UK's third largest university by number (after the Open University and University College London, with 129K and 41K students respectively).

Manchester comfortably outranks all Australian universities in the ARWU because it is science-heavy. One indication of its concentration in the hard sciences is that it has been home to 25 Nobel Laureates, including two current staff members who won the Physics Nobel in 2010.¹⁷

Manchester University is rightly lauded as an example of the outcome of a successful merger but the key point is that the merger was between successful institutions with similar focus on the sciences who shared a long history of collaboration.¹⁸ For example, from 1905 to 1994, student at Manchester University of Science and Technology (UMIST) could take out degrees from Victoria University of Manchester (VUM) (Harman and Harman, 2008, p. 116).

It's pertinent to note as well that the shared vision for the new university was not so much service to the region but very much in line with the broader ambitions of a "global research university". Alan Gilbert, a former VC of Melbourne University who was recruited to be the first VC of the merged entity declared:

"Creating a very good, very large 'Big Civic' university was not the driving vision of those in VUM, UMIST and the wider community responsible for the establishment of the new University of Manchester. Their purpose was to lay a superb foundation upon which those responsible for the new University might build something far more ambitious. Quite explicitly, they hoped that the new University would transcend its 'Big Civic' origins and become one of the finest research and teaching universities in the world" (Harman and Harman, 2018, p. 116/7).

As an example of another successful merger Hare (2021) reports that Peter Klinken "pointed to the University of Paris-Saclay that was formed in 2015 following the merger of a number of universities, institutes of technology, Grande Ecoles and graduate schools. It immediately landed at 14 on at least one international ranking".

There is, in truth, very little that is comparable in the circumstances that led to the formation of Paris-Saclay and the prospective WA mergers.

The diverse French institutions that merged were elite in their respective fields and the merger was backed by the full force of the French government that awarded large funding support, including what *The Economist* describes as the creation of a "huge modernist university campus" and a complement of 9,000 research and teaching staff catering to 48,000 students (Economist, 2020).

The question for UWA is whether a merger with any other WA university will be one between two entities with complementary research strengths (i.e., research economies of scope) or whether it will be principally a merger designed to broaden the student base to extract more revenue subsidy (i.e., revenue economies of scale).

Are key stakeholders' interests likely to be aligned?

¹⁷ There are six fields in which Nobel prizes are awarded: physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, peace, and economics. The literature and peace prizes don't count in research rankings and, in any event, are rarely awarded to academics. The Economics prize is not part of the original set

¹⁸ Many of my subsequent comments reflect my reading of an excellent (2008) paper "Strategic mergers of strong institutions to enhance competitive advantage" by Grant Harman and Kay Harman. They discuss the merger process that led to the University of Manchester being established in 2004.

The problem of process

In corporate mergers, getting a majority of shareholders to accept a takeover bid, usually by paying a substantial premium is typically sufficient to effect a takeover (or merger, depending on how tactful one cares to be with language). This far from assures success in the sense of the merger being profitable but at least it gets done. With universities, there is no similar process for winning control. Any number of stakeholders can block the institutions from even getting together and they often do exercise their veto.

History of attempts at mergers of universities in WA

There have been at least three attempts at mergers between WA universities over the last four decades (Martin, 2021).

In 1986, Murdoch University and ECU discussed a potential merger but nothing more eventuated.

In 1989, a merger between UWA and Murdoch failed at virtually the last hurdle. On Christmas Eve, Hedy Cowan, Leader of the Nationals, joined with two other members of the Liberal Party to defeat the enabling legislation that had been introduced by the then premier Carmen Lawrence (Macintyre, Brett, and Croucher, 2017, p.100).

In 2005, a merger between Curtin and Murdoch was mooted. Harman and Harman (2008) describe the attempt as a particularly interesting case and discuss it in some detail. They report:

“[The merger] would have created a new university with a total enrolment of almost 50,000 students, making it Australia’s largest university. Both Commonwealth and State Governments encouraged this development and the Commonwealth even provided a grant of \$50,000 to support an exploratory study. Late in the discussions, Edith Cowan University, also located in Perth, proposed that it should join the partnership. This would have produced a new institution of about 72,000 students that would be in competition in metropolitan Perth only with the University of Western Australia (with about 17,000 students) and the private Notre Dame University (with just over 4,000 students). In the end, no merger went ahead, mainly because the governing bodies of Curtin and Murdoch Universities decided that the costs would be too great in relation to the possible advantages. However, a substantial Commonwealth or State Government grant might well have resulted in merger while it appears that an unstated factor was that Curtin and Murdoch Universities were unable to agree on composition of the post-merger senior management team”.

The point here and one that has been made by several observers is that without the willing cooperation of the institutions involved, it is politically impossible to effect a merger.

The interest of State government

The other key stakeholder is the State government. The State government has influence and power but little apparent interest in championing any change that has potential to cause political pain for very little upside, noting that the champions for changes that lead to uncertain improvements are likely to be less numerous and motivated than those whose interests will be negatively affected by any merger. As former Melbourne Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis has remarked, “[there are no votes in higher education](#)”.¹⁹

¹⁹ The apparent lack of voter interest in higher education may seem anomalous in light of the relatively high rate of tertiary participation in Australia. In 2019, 52.5% of 25-to-34 year-olds in Australia had a tertiary qualification. The proportion was just 33% in Germany, with the OECD average being 44.9% (AIHW, 2021), yet German voters were sufficiently emotionally invested in their universities to force governments across the political spectrum to reverse the introduction of student fees in the first decade of the 20th century, a development that had seemed

One likely reason for voter apathy is that whilst Australian universities are established as statutory corporations under State legislation, it is the Commonwealth that allocates funds.

Australian universities have not developed sufficient cultural capital or at even valued individual distinctiveness for voters to care about the shape and form of particular institutions to the extent that the Federal government has to factor what voters think in their calculations. Voters principal concern seems to be convenient access to institutions of reasonable quality.

The lack of electoral backlash to John Dawkins' radical reform of the sector in the late 1980s²⁰ and the cavalier way in which the Federal government changed eligibility rules specifically to exclude universities from JobKeeper support is consistent with the above thesis (Moodie, 2020).

The lack of significant Government interest in any merger is a high hurdle to overcome.

The experience of Manchester University is that substantial Government support both in terms of encouragement and financial grants was required for merger to go ahead even though both universities were largely aligned in their vision and supported the merger (Harman and Harman, 2008). There were also written guarantees that there would be no forced staff redundancies.

The interests of the people of WA

As noted earlier, the objectives of a global research university are not the same as those of a civic university that aims to cater to its local constituency.

The difference arguably matters less in a city such as Manchester which counts [fourteen \(14\) universities](#) in its region even though its population is just 530,000 (i.e., not even half of Perth's population). There are many other universities less than a day's drive away.

A mega-university in Perth will be far less responsive to local needs given there is far less effective competition. For instance, UWA's decision to revisit New Courses and introduce new degrees was in large part due to the clear evidence from students' choices that significant elements of New Courses were not popular.

A university with monopolistic control will not have the benefit of market signals to assess the attractiveness of its offerings and even if it does recognise shortcomings it will be much less motivated to address them. A healthy local rivalry between higher education institutions is good for the people of WA.

That said, a merger of, say two of the five universities in the State would arguably still leave sufficient competition in the market.

inevitable (Hotson, 2014). In "Germany's great tuition U-turn", Howard Hotson, Professor of Intellectual History at Oxford, explains the socio-cultural factors that result in German voters taking close interest in their local universities (Hotson, 2014). My impression is that Australians are far less culturally invested in their universities.²⁰ In 2020, *The Australian* reported that former Labor federal government minister Gareth Evans "publicly confessed that he and the rest of the Hawke government had more or less allowed a 40-year-old firebrand to run amok with the nation's higher education system 30 years ago." Evans allegedly said, "... none of John Dawkins's fellow cabinet ministers at the time, and that includes me ... really took much notice of what he was up to from 1987-91, or had any real sense of the scale and significance of the changes he was forcing, as he mounted his blitzkrieg in the higher education system" (Trinca, 2020). It's a safe bet that if the issue had been electorally sensitive they would have paid more attention.

Concluding comments

Merger: A solution in search of a problem?

By any reasonable standard, Western Australia has been well served by its five universities, four of which appear in good shape when judged by their respective missions. UWA has maintained a place in the top 100 ARWU universities for some years, although it seems clear that there is significant risk of it dropping out. Curtin is fast rising through the ranks and ECU is in an expansionary phase.

Importantly, each university occupies a well-defined niche, although some may quibble about the viability of some. For each university to continue their success is not a trivial challenge but most have shown the ability to adapt organically.

To conclude that a merger is the optimal solution at this point is far too premature and indicates that one is severely underestimating the risks and the effort required. On the other hand, to definitively rule out the prospect of a merger would be irresponsible.

A suggested path

The first step is for all stakeholders to agree on what kind of higher education sector would be best for Western Australia. My guess is that any such vision is unlikely to include a behemoth monopoly institution. However, a scenario that includes two or three large actors and a variety of smaller niche institutions would suit most, if not all, interests. It's worth noting we may get to this point organically, without any mergers.

The aim would be a higher education sector that can supply Western Australia with the advantages and cachet of a global research university whilst also catering to local needs and retain competitive pressure.

A useful project in any event would be to foster collaboration across the universities in those disciplines, mainly in health and the sciences, where there are significant economies of scale and scope in research. Ideally, the State government would be encouraged by the universities to promote collaboration by financially supporting projects and institutes that are collaborative ventures.

The benefits of collaboration would lie not just in capturing economies of scale and scope but in building trust and goodwill across the universities so that collaboration in more areas becomes feasible.

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