In Short

REFLECTIONS ON A UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

Dorothy Watts

In her offering, Dorothy Watts reflects on her time as an external student, part-time tutor, and then as staff member of the Department of Classics and Ancient History at The University of Queensland. There have been many changes, but the students remain the same.

My involvement with The University of Queensland was initially as an evening student, studying German while my husband completed his engineering degree at day classes. After the first two years, we moved back north and I completed my degree with the then-External Studies Department. The subjects (courses) were full year, and each the equivalent of 4.8 units (in today’s terms) towards a Bachelor of Arts. At that stage the only subject from Classics available to external students was Latin—but not at beginners’ level. The assumption was that folk who enrolled in the subject had already done senior Latin. Exams were routinely three-hour papers.

In 1974 the university switched to semesters, and subjects in the Arts degree were weighted at ten points, so all students with a degree in progress had to have their results converted to the points system, and, of course, all subjects had to be restructured to fit the semester system. The Latin subject became two. Around this time the Classics and Ancient History Department decided to offer two external subjects, so I enrolled in these to finish off my degree. Subsequently, four advanced ancient history subjects were made available.

External students were quite well supported, in that staff from the various departments would travel to various parts of Queensland where sufficient numbers of students were enrolled in their subjects, in order to conduct weekend tutorials. This did not happen for students in the Classics and Ancient History offerings until later in the 1970s, by which time I was tutoring a group of adults at the Mackay University Centre. I, along with other teachers in secondary schools in the district, made the most of the university staff who came north, and ancient history days were organised for the school students of the area on the Friday before the tutorial weekend. Those staff who ventured north for tutorials and/or ancient history days included Don Barrett, Trevor Bryce, Hugh Lindsay and Bob Milns.

As was common in those days, many of those enrolled in external subjects were teachers upgrading their qualifications, or (in many other cases) people who had long wanted to do a degree but only now had the time to fit it in. All were very motivated, and as far as I remember, all did very well studying long distance. Library books were an important aid, and Thatcher Library catered for external

**Dorothy Watts** (BA, PhD, FSA, FACE, ATCL, AMusA, CELTA) is a former Reader and Associate Professor and now Honorary Research Consultant in Classics and Ancient History at the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, UQ. Dorothy was a member of staff 1990–2006 and Head of Department 1998–2002. She is a Registered Teacher, Queensland (Teacher in Qld secondary schools for twenty years) and was the recipient of Excellence in Teaching Award at UQ in 2003. Her publications include Women in Early Britain (London: Routledge, 2005); Religion in Late Roman Britain (London: Routledge, 1998); and Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain (London: Routledge, 1991).
students. We were limited to three books at a time, and it was always an effort to get through as many on the reading list as one could before starting to write an assignment (nothing changes there!). Articles were not limited, and postage was paid for by the university. Due dates were strictly applied, down to the accepted date being that stamped by the Post Office on the envelope containing the assignment. It didn’t take students too long to work out where an obliging staff member in a little out-of-the-way Post Office would back-date an assignment! Ah, times have changed there! On the other hand, if one had a reasonable excuse, penalties could be avoided. (Mine—not often resorted to—was usually, “Sorry this is late—kids sick.”) It was not always easy to work full-time, run a house and two children, entertain for a general manager husband, and study late into the night. I have always had the greatest sympathy for mature-age students—generally speaking, school-leavers undergoing a university course have it a great deal easier!

Because of the distances involved, external students such as I had little to do with the university or the staff, and it was not until I became a tutor that I actually got to know at least some of the Classics staff; by then I had decided to enrol in a higher degree. When I finally finished my PhD in Ancient History and ultimately became a staff member at UQ, I joined a team of people who soon became friends rather than former lecturers, and I settled happily into life on the seventh level of Michie.

These early years at UQ coincided with the last years of Professor Brian Wilson as Vice-Chancellor. His successor, Professor John Hay, brought a new dimension to the university—more structured, and more actively focused on outside collaborations and funding. This reflected the way the tertiary sector was heading—an emphasis on outside grants, from the ARC and industry, and a shift in funding for departments and faculties. Hard-working Classics staff worked even harder, with the abolition of positions such as full-time tutors and an increase in the size of tutorial classes until they have become quasi-lectures. Gone are the days when a maximum size was twelve students—nowadays twenty-five is considered a fair number. The quality of teaching at these tutorials has not decreased, as Classics has always had highly competent, committed postgraduates to take these classes; but the marking load has increased substantially, and staff have had to warn those postgraduates keen to take on tutorial work that it might be detrimental to their own studies and research.

The tightening of funds for departments saw the decrease in full-time staff numbers. When I joined the staff there were eight of us (I replaced Don Barrett, who was full-time Dean of Arts): Professor Bob Milns, Brian Jones, John Whitehorne, Suzanne Dixon, Michael Dyson, Max Kanowski and Bruce Gollan were all amiable and helpful colleagues. External studies classes soon were cut from the university’s offerings (the Dawkins Report), so we lost about a quarter of our clientele. It took about five years to recover from this loss. Evening classes continued, but they, too have now disappeared as staff numbers have continued to decline since the retirement of senior staff members.

But the big gains were in postgraduate numbers: when I joined the staff in 1990, I was only the fourth person to have gained a PhD in Classics and Ancient History (and the first woman); but under Bob Milns’s guidance and with his great enthusiasm the numbers of honours and postgraduates gradually increased. I have lost count of the number of PhDs Classics and Ancient History has now produced, but there are certainly over twenty. Add to that the numbers of MPhils (formerly MAs), and the coursework MAs, and it can be seen that Classics and Ancient History has made great progress over the past twenty years, despite funding and staff cuts, restriction of research monies, and staff teaching overloads.

Another area where there was considerable progress was in the development and extension of the Antiquities Museum. The work done by Max Kanowski and Bruce Gollan was the basis for the museum as we have it today, but with the appointment of Sonia Puttock as director and curator the museum now makes a major contribution to the Arts Faculty’s and to the university’s cultural profile. Organisations such as the Friends of Antiquity have been pleased to contribute to the collection, and the popularity of
schools’ visits to the museum increases yearly. The naming of the museum in honour of Professor Milns was a fitting tribute to his promotion of classics and ancient history over many years.

And the students? When I began my studies I typed my assignments with a manual typewriter on foolscap paper with carbon copies; now the computer has made life so much easier—and undoubtedly the computer gives students the capacity to produce so much better work. I like to think that the standard is at least as good as it was in those days. Most students who were full-time did not also hold down part-time jobs, as they now do. That is undoubtedly the result of the re-introduction of university fees (whatever one wants to call HECS), and so there are many more pressures on today’s students. Communication by internet has sped up contact between students, and between students and staff, but I am not sure that there has been a subsequent improvement in the quality of that communication. Texting is not designed to improve one’s spelling or expression! On the other hand, on-line publications open many research doors to the students who have difficulty in getting in to the library, and such aids must alleviate the pressures on them a little.

Despite the advancements in technology and the growing pace of life at UQ, I have still found students the same as they always were—intelligent, some highly motivated and some not, mostly kind and considerate of others, generally appreciative of their education and of staff input and interest, and the kind of young people who in whose hands I will be happy to see the future of this country.