The Illusion of Metrics and the Hollowing Out of Australian Higher Education: Critical Reflections on the 2027 THE Interdisciplinary Rankings

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Abstract

Many university administrators are skeptical of university rankings unless their university has done well. With that in mind, the top Australian university, RMIT, ranked equal 40 on the global list of the 'University interdisciplinary rankings 2027'. The University of Queensland is not even listed. Deakin (65) is second of the Australian university and what I know in Deakin that top place, second, is well deserved in a set of universities which have disgraced themselves globally, if rankings matter. This essay digs deeper for the thinking in the ranked results in Australia.

[1] Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) has been fairly used in the production of this work. The tool used is Google NotebookLM (recently rebranded as Gemini Notebook). It is an AI-powered virtual research assistant and thinking partner designed to help a person interact deeply with their own documents. Unlike general chatbots, it is source-grounded, meaning it only generates answers based on the specific PDFs, documents, or links uploaded. The A.I. process in the production of this work has been limited to the attached (prompts) on each of the questions in turn. This ensures an accurate reading of each source. The author then rearranged and re-edited the answers the A.I. provided. The human author publishes this work. A.I. is never an author when used properly. This assistance is not qualitatively different from a human research assistant when that assistance is deemed to have no authorial status but is acknowledged.

1. How National Higher Education Policies Have Ruined Australian Universities

The release of global league tables—such as the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings and the Interdisciplinary Science Rankings (ISR) 2027—triggers an annual ritual of institutional marketing gossip and Vice-Chancellories celebrating composite numerical scores (Buch 2026b: 1)[1][2]. Yet, for serious higher education policy researchers, these index scores mask deep structural decline (Buch 2026b: 1)[2]. The root cause of this systemic crisis lies in four decades of national higher education policy, initiated by the Dawkins Unified National System reforms of 1988, which forcibly merged institutions, imposed market competition, and replaced traditional collegial governance with corporate economic rationalism and "retail governance" (Marginson 1996: 27; Buch 2026b: 21)[3].

Under William Clark's historical-sociological framework of academic rationalization, modern university governance has inherited 18th-century Prussian cameralism and "police science" (Polizeiwissenschaft) (Clark 2006: 12–13; Buch 2026a: 3–4)[6]. Australian state policies treat public universities as corporate mining entities or economic police institutions designed strictly to yield vocational utility and quantifiable output (Clark 2006: 12; Buch 2026a: 4)[8][9]. Academic managers rely on vanity metrics—promotional titles, citation impact factors, and commercial grant counts—while core academic labour is defunded, fragmented, and casualized (Buch 2026a: 67; Corwin 2026: 168)[9].

Furthermore, national policy initiatives like the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package have severely distorted Australian higher education by artificially doubling fee liabilities for humanities and social science students (Buch 2025: 1–3; Buch 2026a: 38)[10][11]. This fee regime subordinates critical inquiry (*educere*) to narrow, market-driven skill packages (*educare*) (Buch 2026a: 39)[10].

This policy environment directly sabotages genuine interdisciplinary research (Newman 2023: 304)[12]. While ranking frameworks like the *THE ISR 2027* measure inputs, processes, and outputs via heavy bibliometric weighting (40%) and reputation surveys (25%) (Times Higher Education 2026: 4–6)[13][14], Australian administrative structures disincentivize cross-disciplinary collaboration (Newman 2023: 344)[15]. As Empirical evidence shows, university executives favour abstract calls for "cultural change" while withholding concrete material support, such as teaching relief, internal seed funding, or revised workload accounting (Newman 2023: 309, 324)[16]. Consequently, metrics like RMIT placing equal 40th or Deakin 65th represent statistical artifacts of metric optimization rather than structural support for holistic scholarship (Buch 2026b: 2)[19].

2. What "Higher Education" Means in Australian Society and How That Can Change

Historically, as documented in the Murray Report (1957) and Martin Report (1964), higher education in Australia was conceptualized as a public welfare investment dedicated to cultivating a "liberal spirit," democratic citizenship, and non-material societal betterment (Committee on Australian Universities 1957: 8; Xu 2023: 222–224)[22]. However, under contemporary biopolitics and credential inflation, higher education has been reduced to an arena of positional competition (Marginson 1996: 25; Xu 2023: 220)[25][26]. Degrees are purchased primarily as positional tickets to secure relative advantage in Thurow's labour queue, decoupling learning value from substantive knowledge (*use-value*) and transforming it entirely into exchange-value (Labaree 1997: 55; Collins 2019: 12; Buch 2026b: 43)[27][28].

To change what higher education means in Australian society, institutions must undergo a philosophical and pedagogical ascent:

1. **Reclaiming Personalism over Technocratic Reductionism:** Following Dr. Neville Buch's personalist framework, universities must restore the understanding of the human person as an incarnate spirit (*esprit incarné*) possessing inviolable dignity, rather than treating students and academics as quantifiable data points or revenue units (Buch 2025: 5; Buch 2026a: 154)[29][30].

2. **Integrating Indigenous Relational Epistemologies:** Higher education must move beyond Western possessive logic and superficial "reconciliation branding" (Moreton-Robinson 2015: 15; Moran 2023: 183)[31]. By embedding Birrbay and Dhanggati principles such as *Maa-bularrbabu*—acting with responsibility for the next seven generations—universities can replace short-sighted 4-year corporate strategic cycles with deep relational obligations to Country, community, and interdisciplinary wisdom (Moran 2023: 198; Bell & Moran 2023: 297)[34][35].

3. **Inverting Bureaucratic Rituals into Convivial Learning Webs:** Re-envisioning Ivan Illich's "inversion of institutions," universities must dismantle rigid, automated Learning Management System (LMS) traps and passive lecture halls, replacing them with decentralized, dialogical "learning webs" (*sermo*) anchored in care and mutual inquiry (Illich 1973: 10; Buch 2026a: 51)[30].

3. How Policy Can Change to Catch Up with the Rest of the World

To resolve its structural crisis and align with progressive international developments, Australian higher education policy requires immediate executive and legislative reform:

- **Repeal the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) Fee Regime:** The federal government must abolish punitive humanities fee structures to establish fee equity, ensuring that interdisciplinary broad-mindedness is not financially penalized (Buch 2025: 3; Buch 2026a: 38)[11].
- **Transition from Exploitative Voluntarism to Formal Contractualism:** University leadership must cease relying on unpaid academic voluntarism and precarious casual contracts (Buch 2026a: 67; Corwin 2026: 168)[9][11]. Intellectual work, community engagement, and humanities research must be formally contracted and protected (Buch 2026a: 147)[11].
- **Realign Research Governance with Material Incentives:** Rather than relying on top-down administrative rhetoric, research policy must provide structural support for interdisciplinary teams—including dedicated administrative coordination, physical interdisciplinary facilities, internal grant allocations, and workload points that explicitly reward cross-faculty synthesis (Newman 2023: 324, 328; Times Higher Education 2026: 3–4)[17].
- **Abandon Short-Sighted Metric-Driven Funding:** Policy must learn from international correctives, such as Taiwan's *Higher Education Sprout Project*, which explicitly rolled back short-term global ranking targets after recognizing that competitive metric schemes dried up essential local humanities research and social science knowledge (Xu 2023: 274–275)[41].
- **Implement the POLICE Diagnostic Framework:** Institutional boards and government auditing bodies should adopt the **POLICE model** (*Philosophically, Ontology, Logic, Intersect, Compatibility, Education*) as an internal audit tool to eliminate self-contradictory corporate propaganda ("institutional bullshit") and ensure empirical and ethical compatibility in governance (Buch & Peach 2024: 1; Buch 2026a: 157)[36].

4. Why This Message Is Important

This Restorative message is not a mere theoretical exercise; it represents an existential imperative for democratic civilization:

1. **Reclaiming Human Agency Against Algorithmic Denoetization:** As the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and Generative AI accelerate, higher education faces mechanical "denoetization"—the liquidation of human reflective judgment (*Selbstdenken*) and critical discernment (Stiegler 1998: 10; Buch 2026a: 9; Buch 2026b: 50)[6]. Restoring human authorship ensures that the human *Who* remains the active pilot of the technological *What* (Stiegler 1998; Buch 2026a: 10; Buch 2026b: 50)[49].

2. **Overcoming "Historical Forgetfulness":** Trapped in annual ranking cycles, public discourse suffers from historical forgetfulness, repeating past policy mistakes and narrowing education into shallow corporate PR (Buch 2024: 2; Buch 2026a: 42)[50]. Through Spiral Historiography, institutions can re-evaluate past intellectual struggles with modern inclusivity, equipping citizens to unhook from populist dogma and engage in critical civic discourse (Buch 2025: 8; Buch 2026a: 28)[50].

3. **Healing Academic Labour and Achieving Eudaimonia :** Adopting panser—the procedural necessity of *thinking as caring*—provides a curative response to workplace trauma, symbolic misery, and systemic alienation (Buch 2026a: 10; Buch 2026b: 28, 51)[30]. Reclaiming personalist ethics ensures that universities fulfill their higher social mission: fostering Aristotelian human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), democratic dissidence, and shared wisdom (Arendt 1977: 193; Buch 2025: 8; Buch 2026a: 10; Buch 2026b: 51)[57][58].

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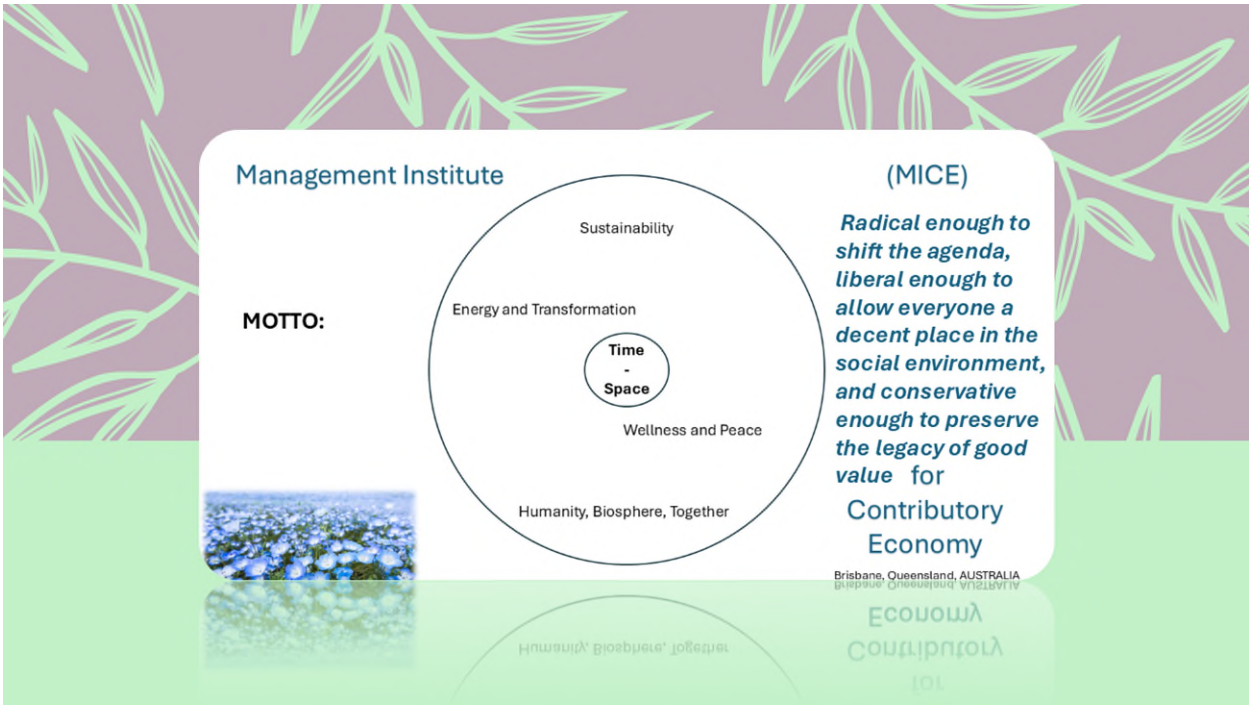
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