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# ANU's fortunes fall while stars align for Queensland

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Peter Hoj says the University of Queensland runs on raw research power. **Photo: Glenn Hunt**

### Tim Dodd

There's a seismic shift occurring in the top ranks of Australia's universities. The Australian National University, long the home of world-class research in this country, is slipping further down the ladder. And it is being overtaken by the University of Queensland, once a provincial backwater but now a rising power among universities globally.

ANU's academic superstar Brian Schmidt, who won the Nobel prize for physics two years ago, sounded the alarm on his institution in a speech last Thursday at ANU in Canberra.

He said it was no longer "clearly Australia's leading university" and the institution's mandate to be Australia's top research university when it was established in 1946 was under threat.

"I'm here to tell you there are things that we need to be worried about today. Because if we don't they are going to come out bad. And we can already see the beginnings of that today," he said.

Professor Schmidt said ANU's problem was declining funding relative to the other research-intensive Australian universities known collectively as the Group of Eight.

ANU has received extra money from the federal government to fund research since it was established in 1946 but this is declining sharply, down by half since 1995. This has occurred even as other top universities, Melbourne, Queensland, Sydney, NSW and Monash, are accessing the growing amount of money available for applied health research as well as using the surplus they make from educating large numbers of students to build up their research budgets.

ANU can't go down this path, Professor Schmidt said.

Even though two Nobel prizes in medicine have been awarded to ANU academics for work done at the university – John Eccles in 1963 for work on the central nervous system and Peter Doherty in 1996 for his immunology research – the university specialises in fundamental research, not the applied medical research which is now attracting funding and which ANU's rivals are grabbing with glee.

Nor does the 14,000-student ANU, located in the small city of Canberra, have the ability to build up student numbers like other top universities such as Melbourne (38,000), Queensland (37,000) and Sydney (41,000) in order to generate cash.

## No money advantage

Professor Schmidt said even with the extra federal government money to fund ANU research, worth \$177 million a year, ANU no longer had a money advantage, and this was affecting the quality of its research. “When we look at our research output now, while we produce more papers per person, we do not produce papers with higher citation rates any more,” he said.

On Friday ANU vice-chancellor Ian Young said: “I absolutely agree with Brian’s diagnosis of the problem; it’s my diagnosis too.

“This is still a great university but unless we address these fundamental issues it will be more and more difficult for this institution to be even as good as the other Group of Eight universities, let alone be a true world-leading - institution, which is what it was set up to do.”

The extent of ANU’s fall is revealed in the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), widely recognised as the most reliable ranking list which rates universities on objective research performance indicators.

On this listing, which is prepared by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China, ANU ranked No. 50 in the world when the ranking was first published in 2003. Now it stands at 66. While ANU has fallen, Australia’s other top four universities have either level-pegged (Sydney) or steadily risen (Melbourne and Queensland).

In that period Melbourne has moved from 92 to 56 to become indisputably Australia’s top research university, while Queensland has moved from well outside the top 100 to 85.

The ARWU list is built around prestige research. Indicators include the number of citations by a university’s researchers in top journals and the number of Nobel prizes and Fields medals (for mathematics) won by a university’s academic staff and alumni.

## Winners and losers

How top universities are ranked with and without the impact of Nobel prizes

	2013	2012	2012 (excluding Nobel prizes)*	Change
University of Melbourne	54	57	51	+6
Australian National University	66	64	68	-4
University of Queensland	85	90	62	+28
University of WA	91	98	109	-11
University of Sydney	97	93	71	+22

\* Calculated by  
University of Melbourne

SOURCE: ACADEMIC RANKING OF WORLD UNIVERSITIES, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE



Arguably, Nobel prizes and Fields medals are a bit of a lottery because they are relatively rare and it takes luck as well as research excellence to win them. The University of Melbourne recalculated the 2012 ARWU list leaving these out and while Melbourne gained six places, Queensland rose 28 places to jump ahead of ANU, making it Australia’s second-ranking research university based on its year-in, year-out research performance.

How has the University of Queensland, which once lived in the shadow of the ANU and the universities of Sydney and Melbourne, managed to reach so high?

## Raw research

“Ours is based on raw research power. We don’t have a Nobel prize,” said University of Queensland vice-chancellor Peter Hoj.

Most of the credit for Queensland’s position today has to go to Professor Hoj’s predecessors, particularly John

Hay, who held the job from 1996 to 2007. Professor Hay grasped the opportunity presented by former Queensland premier Peter Beattie's Smart State program to inject money into the university, building up its medical research capacity in particular, helped by big donations from givers such as Atlantic Philanthropies founder Charles "Chuck" Feeney.

"All the stars lined up for the University of Queensland," said its deputy vice-chancellor (research) Max Lu.

He said that in the past 15 years the university had strategically built a tremendous capacity for research, by building infrastructure and attracting the best people to use it.

"Once you do that you go up in the rankings regardless of what methodology and metrics are used," he said.

The University of Queensland's growing firepower is not only evident in its research scores. This year its MBA program was top in *The Australian Financial Review* BOSS's MBA Ranking, the first time that Melbourne Business School's MBA had been pushed out of first place.

Not only did the University of Queensland place first in the *Boss* MBA rankings, but Queensland business schools filled five of the top 10 places in the rankings – another indication of the growing strength of universities in the state.

"Other Queensland universities, as well, moved ahead because of the Smart State [program]," Professor Lu said.

Where will the University of Queensland go next? At a time when more government money is unlikely, Professor Hoj said he is targeting business to invest in research. He said about \$100 million of the university's current \$368 million annual research budget is from business and his goal is to double the \$100 million in seven years, that is, grow it at a compounding 10 per cent a year.

"We believe a large proportion of that will not necessarily be from Australian firms but from international firms," he said.

But still he eyes jealously the best universities in North America, which benefit from generous alumni donations, large endowments and serious business investment.

"If you gave a university like ours another \$300 million to \$500 million to play with, we would be dangerously good," he said.

## Unclear future

Queensland has a plan for growth, but for ANU it is not immediately clear where it can find more revenue.

"We should do better in industry links than we do. But we are located in the national capital, not a centre of large industry," said ANU vice-chancellor Professor Young.

Would it solve the problem if the federal government would allow ANU to shift to a private model and charge more for the high quality undergraduate education it offers? An ANU bachelor degree currently costs students the same in HECS fees as studying at a low-ranked university.

"I'm not certain that moving towards a private model of higher education is actually going to fly. I think, politically and socially, it's not something that's going to happen in Australia," Professor Young said.

Professor Schmidt agreed. "Higher fees could break the HECS scheme. I'm very fond of the HECS scheme," he said on Friday.

Professor Young believes the ideal solution is more money from the government. He calls for "more directed research excellence funding" which would restore some of what ANU has lost as its special research money, the National Institutions Grant, has declined in real value.

But for ANU it is not enough to just be different from other top Australian universities. It needs to be able to justify the difference.

Professor Schmidt thinks it should aim to be Australia's version of the elite US universities such as Harvard, Yale and Stanford, with small student numbers and very high quality teaching and research. This would mean building up ANU's world-class research areas and cutting those which don't make the grade.

Professor Young knows there are hard decisions ahead which will be tough for many ANU staff. "It will be a difficult discussion internally," he said.

But not just for ANU. "There needs to be a debate right across Australia about how we as a nation support

research excellence," Professor Young said.

The Australian Financial Review



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