Professor Peter McPhee has been described as the ‘architect’ of the Melbourne Model. As Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), he chaired the 2006 Curriculum Commission for the university, and has since had responsibility for the implementation of the Melbourne Model and the necessary changes to student support. In September 2007 he was named the university’s first Provost. He has also held a Personal Chair in History since 1993, and has taught and published widely on the history of the French Revolution. Among his most recent publications are *The French Revolution 1789–1799* (2002); *A Social History of France, 1780–1914* (2004); and *Living the French Revolution, 1789–99* (2006). The MHJ editorial collective felt that Professor McPhee would be well placed to comment on the way the changes to our university education model might affect the discipline of history.

The university’s Curriculum Commission Report states that this is a far-reaching curriculum reform with the objective of creating an outstanding and distinctive ‘Melbourne Experience’ for undergraduate and postgraduate students.\(^1\) It is deliberately informed by a ‘triple helix’ of teaching, research and ‘knowledge transfer’. The report goes on to claim that it is an educational reform designed to equip students with disciplinary strength, intellectual flexibility and a global outlook necessary for twenty-first century workplaces and for effective citizenship in a globalising world.

The report further states that the Model is an ambitious, groundbreaking initiative in Australian higher education, breaking with Australian practice of undergraduate entry into professional degrees such as Law, Medicine and Education. It draws on the 3+2+3 or three-cycle structure identified with the Bologna Process,

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McPhee

the objectives of North American undergraduate ‘liberal education’, and related developments in Asia, but does so within the context of Australian higher education policy and history. In particular, its ‘new generation’ undergraduate degrees seek to provide both disciplinary depth and breadth and clear pathways into graduate programs and research higher degrees through Honours and Masters. It is a distinctive model aligned with international structures.

What follows is an interview conducted by Damien Williams, a PhD candidate in the School of Historical Studies, with Professor McPhee on 20 September 2007. The purpose of the interview was to draw out some issues of interest and concern related to the future of history in the new ‘Melbourne Model’.

DW: How will students gain a deep understanding of historical research in a breadth subject?

PMcP: I suppose the short answer, Damien, is that they won’t. That is really not the point of enabling students to do breadth subjects. We’ve introduced a breadth component in all of the new undergraduate degrees because we want students to have the opportunity to become familiar with a wider range of disciplines but of course the other key element of the undergraduate degrees is that they also have to have the requisite depth in them as well, the students have to do a major and it’s through that that we would expect students to have an encounter with the nature of historical research and a research based project. Whereas, our assumption would be that students who are doing a history subject or a couple of history subjects as part of a breadth component from a Commerce degree or a Science degree … they’re not doing that to get a deep familiarity with historical research, they’re doing it so that they have an historical perspective of a particular period of history.

DW: Your article based on the Curriculum Commission Report makes clear that the future of research will take place between disciplines. What will the future of research be if the foundations of the discipline are not adequately taught?

PMcP: Well, certainly our view, and it’s by no means a controversial view, is that increasingly significant research projects are going to involve people from across disciplines. It’s not a model that is very common in the humanities and social sciences but it will be, certainly if you look at the maps we’ve done of where discipline collaborations happen across the university—who works with whom—if you look at the whole engineering, science, health sciences area there are extraordinary crossovers in terms of collaborations because people realise if they’re going to develop a significant research project that they need to work in teams and they need people from different disciplines. Now that is by no means the norm in humanities and social sciences, but I suspect that in the future it increasingly will be, as I hope that people in the sciences and the health sciences
and so on, will realise that there is a great deal that people in the humanities have to offer as part of a research team. I happen to think that historical research, which has a very rich pedigree at this university, is in a state of some crisis at the moment, around the world. I think it’s extremely insular and I wouldn’t exempt myself from that criticism. I think there is a rather insular mentality among many of the humanities, and history among them, about what other disciplines you need to know to make sense of an historical problem. Now that’s a very roundabout answer to your question. I mean if you’re saying that research methodologies or research projects in the future need to be located between disciplines rather than squarely within them, what will be the level of expertise necessary—what we are hoping, of course, is that across these undergraduate programs that students will develop a core specialty: a major in history or botany or finance but they will also be developing perhaps a second string to their bow. It may well be that students find that ‘you know I’m doing a major in history but goodness I am learning an awful lot from the breadth subjects I’m taking in economics or in psychology’. We hope and anticipate that one of the spin-offs from the new curriculum is going to be that there will be a greater openness to the possibilities of interdisciplinary and new types of research projects. I think one of the really exciting things about the whole curriculum model is the development of the university breadth subjects, and history is involved in one or two of them, where we’ve got people from the sciences as well as from humanities actually designing subjects and teaching them together. We think that’s a wonderful way for students to realise that if you want to answer big questions, for example about climate change, you don’t do it from the perspective of one discipline, you need many disciplines.

DW: *Catastrophes, Cultures & the Angry Earth*, for example, and the history subject, *Making the Modern World 1300–1800* have a very broad span. What depth of knowledge do you expect students to have after completing this type of breadth subject and how will that be assessed?

PMcP: Obviously if you’re teaching different sorts of subjects, like the one which looks at the span of early modern and modern history, its been designed so that students have a broad understanding of half a millennia of historical change and the reasons behind those changes, they’re not designed to be deep subjects. One of the key findings of the curriculum review that was done in the Faculty of Arts last year is that there are way too many very specific subjects particularly at first year level and that it would be of greater benefit if students at first year level were undertaking subjects that were much broader and bolder. One of the casualties of that approach, with which I agree, has been that my own subject of the American Revolution is not being taught at first year. Even the French Revolution (which I think should be compulsory for all students in all degrees!) is going to become a
second year subject, but I see the logic in that. The American Revolution can quite adequately be understood by students within the context of broader American history at second year, it’s too specific for a first year subject, in my view. And I think that a subject where students gain a familiarity and a sense of narrative structure is actually a very valuable thing because they won’t be getting that in the last few years of secondary school where the curriculum is very focused. So, I think that in terms of an introduction to understanding big questions, broad sweeps of history, it’s not designed to be deep, it can’t be, but its also designed to be the sort of subject that students who might be doing any other type of degree might say ‘I’ve always wanted to know about Early Modern and Renaissance history: here’s my chance to do it’. I think the Catastrophes subject, which looks to me a brilliant one, has a very different objective and that is that it will be looking at a particular type of phenomenon of natural disasters and realizing that actually if we’re to make sense of why these happen and what their repercussions are, we need to have conversations between engineers and people in public health and people in history and so on. So that subject will be focusing on a very specific phenomenon but from a multidisciplinary point of view. I think there are other ways of acquiring a richness of knowledge than taking a very small subject and saying ‘I’m an expert in the history of the Women’s Temperance Union’ or ‘I’m an expert in the history of the French Revolution.’ I think there is also a way of saying that there is a different type of knowledge and that is the capacity to say I can put those things in wider contexts across a very long period of time, ‘The French Revolution as an example of a place of political change in the making of the modern world,’ ‘the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in the history of democracy and women’s rights,’ there are other forms of knowledge than specificity and depth, it seems to me, and they all have a place.

DW: Will an increase in the number of graduate students in the university mean a decrease in the number of research higher degree places in areas such as history?

PMcP: No, they’re quite separate. Universities are funded by the Commonwealth government in particular cluster areas and the funding that flows to those cluster areas varies according to the estimated costs of teaching students in those areas, so humanities students are funded at a much lower level than veterinary science students for obvious reasons, and we also get funded places for research higher degree students and a certain number of scholarships, so we are not constrained at all in the number of higher degree students that we enrol, that’s not at the expense of more students or whatever. In fact there are some areas in the university where we would like more research higher degree students, where we think we should have more. There are some specific discipline areas or even specific supervisors where we’re really at a maximum in terms of our capacity to supervise but we could
still take quite a few more. But no, the shift of professional programs like law and architecture and nursing and social work and teaching and ultimately all the health professions, the shifting of those to graduate level is not at all at the expense of research higher degree places: they’re funded differently.

DW: Will the emphasis on multidisciplinary teaching in the new BA reduce the number of staff available for supervising MA or PhD students in specialised subject areas?

PMcP: I don’t believe that it should. It might however lead to some rather more multidisciplinary supervisory panels, which could be interesting. I think that the multidisciplinary subjects that are being offered in the first year of the BA are terrific because I suspect the vast majority of students are rather like me when I was in first year a long time ago and felt very nervous about being at university. The only risk I was prepared to take in terms of a new subject area was psychology, otherwise I stuck with what I had done at school because I thought ‘I know a bit about that’. In other words, I had nothing to do with philosophy or anthropology, I wasn’t brave enough and I do think that having first year subjects where you are actually going to be drawing staff together from a number of departments, giving students an encounter with a greater range of disciplines, will have some really rich spin-offs and one of them will be people from our humanities or Arts departments having greater familiarity with each other. There are too many silos and I think that people once they start teaching will think ‘this is interesting’ and maybe when they take on a new PhD student they will be more likely to think ‘I know people from other schools who might have something to contribute around this thesis.’ But let me stress that in every one of these undergraduate degrees, the assumption that we’re building in is that the academic core of the university is the discipline. That’s where academics build their loyalty—I may be a member of the Faculty of Arts or Science and the University of Melbourne, but I’m a historian or I’m a botanist or a zoologist’ or whatever. And increasingly as students do their majors they feel that same identity as well. I mean we’re assuming that by the time people are doing third year history they’ll feel a very strong sense of being part of a history cohort, they’ll have a capstone experience, and that’s one of the main drivers of that report of the curriculum commission. There’ll still be ample numbers of people who say ‘well at first year I did participate in a whole faculty subject but I’m still an expert in my discipline and that’s where my intellectual identity comes from’.

DW: What changes, if any, will be made to the review process for research higher degrees?

PMcP: There is an important conversation going on at the moment about what the relationship should be between what is now called the School of Graduate
Research with the Graduate School of the Faculty of Arts. Are there things that ought to take place in those graduate school hubs rather than in the school of graduate research? The School of Graduate Research obviously has a key university responsibility in terms of approvals and quality assurance and monitoring the quality of what we’re doing and also providing a lot of very important enrichment activities for PhD students in terms of multidisciplinary seminars and social spaces. We’re actually in the middle of a very significant discussion about the role that departments, faculties and the school of Graduate Research play in the process of reviewing candidature, because at the moment it happens at all three levels. It’s cumbersome, it’s paper-based and I think some students and supervisors find it vaguely irritating that there is so much reporting. How could we do that better and more efficiently? But certainly what cannot be in question is the quality of the higher research experience. People tend to think of the Melbourne Model as being about a broader undergraduate education and then professional graduate degrees. It’s about three levels of education and it has to be on that third level—how can we actually improve the quality of the PhD and how do we improve the quality of the PhD student experience. People forget that the third cycle of higher education is very much a part of the Melbourne Model.

DW: Research higher degrees are often considered a sort of apprenticeship in which students have the opportunity to acquire both research and teaching skills. How will the Melbourne Model provide adequate opportunities for postgraduate history students to work as tutors and guest lecturers?

PMcP: The most important thing for the discipline of history within the school of historical studies will be to attract a lot of students: it’s not the university’s responsibility to do that. I think the discipline of history has a fantastic opportunity because for the first time in any university in Australia it will be possible for all undergraduate students to take one or more history subjects. Or they may take none. And this is the challenge for my former department—I hope people are rubbing their hands with glee at the thought that they will potentially have thousands of students wanting to do broader and more challenging history subjects, like ‘The World between 1300–1800’, that’s the basis or one of the bases on which the good health of the discipline is going to depend. And if that’s the case there will be plenty of opportunities for tutoring. Plus, the fact that plainly the Faculty of Arts, supported by the university, believes that there should be rather fewer subjects and they should be rather bigger, that too gives some important opportunities for tutoring. I certainly think there is going to be a great opportunity for students who have got an interest, particularly at first-year level, but not only first-year level, at being involved in sort of multidisciplinary subjects where they’ll learn not only an historical perspective of ‘the history of catastrophes’, but they’ll also have to get
their heads around the way engineers explain movements of tectonic plates, that sort of thing. So we will still have large numbers of undergraduate students needing tutoring. And I can’t think of a discipline that is better placed than history to really make its mark as one of the natural poles of attraction for students all across the university. I can’t think of another discipline that has a better opportunity.

DW: What effect will the increased class sizes that you mentioned before have under the Melbourne Model on the quality of education within the discipline of History, and more generally across the Arts Faculty?

PMcP: I think one of the big challenges for the Faculty of Arts and the BA is to maintain the importance of small group teaching through tutorials and that is a budgetary matter, unfortunately. I think that at the heart of the BA is really good tutoring. One of the things we are putting in place for next year is a whole university tutor induction so that as well as people getting some basic induction to the discipline through what the School of Historical Studies does or what the Faculty of Arts does by way of tutor induction, we want to make sure that all tutors across the university are also having a whole of university induction to the nature of tutoring and where it fits within the university education, what the policies are pertaining to tutors and all the rest of it. So I think small-group teaching has to be protected within the new Bachelor of Arts degree and that’s partly a matter of the budgetary health of the Arts Faculty which is obviously a major preoccupation for us all at the moment. I don’t think, by the way, that there is a problem with very large lectures. Some of the best regarded lectures in the University of Melbourne are the very biggest—the largest subjects in the university are microeconomics and macroeconomics in first-year Commerce and the quality of teaching score that they get is 4.2, 4.3 and it’s because they’ve been very imaginative about the way they teach 1800 students and the students love it. They have to give repeat lectures obviously, but they just provide such good small-group support for the students and such good support for those tutors that the students feel they are part of a learning community with really good support and there are people who know their name and all the rest of it. I’m not at all bothered that there will be large first-year classes, I hope there are, I hope there are students from all over the university clamoring to get into Arts subjects in first year. But what is going to be really important then is that there is small group support for those large classes.

DW: How will you know that the Melbourne Model has been a success?

PMcP: There will be various measures. One, of course, is how attractive it will be to Year 12 students and we’ll know that very soon because they are just going through the process of finalising their VTAC preferences. I think it’s actually going to be a few years before we get a sense of how well the graduate and professional
programs are going. I’ve got no doubt, for example, that the new Bachelor of Arts is going to be extremely successful. I have no trouble when I go out to schools, as I often do, conveying to people just why it’s going to be a fabulous degree. I think that is true across the board for our new undergraduate programs—we’ll soon know in terms of what level of demand there is but it will take us a little while into the future to realise just how well something like the Master of Teaching is working or the Master of Social Work. The load in the new Bachelor of Arts is essentially the same as in the current one. I mean there will be as many students. And we’ll have to wait and see whether the students that come to do it will be as strong as they are now and our assumption is that that will be the case.