



AUSTRALIAN HISTORY'S LAST STAND AN AUDIT OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY TEACHING AT UNIVERSITIES

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1. Key Research Findings

This report examines the way in which the history of Australia is currently being taught in Australian universities. It is based on a systematic review of all 147 Australian history subjects taught in 2018 at the 35 Australian universities that offer programs of study in history.

This audit builds on research which was commenced by the Institute of Public Affairs in 2015. These were published as *The End of History...At Australian Universities* (2015)¹ and *The Rise of Identity Politics. An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017*.²

The three most common themes in the 147 Australian history subjects offered in Australian universities in 2018 are, in order:

- Identity Politics: Class, Race, and Gender (102 subjects)
- Indigenous History and Studies (57 subjects)
- War and Conflict (53 subjects)

1. Identity Politics

Students are being offered a range of subjects dominated by identity politics. Of the 147 Australian history subjects, a total of 102 treat the theme of 'class' (15), 'race' (37) and 'gender' (50). These themes appear in a significantly higher number of subjects than for example, 'democracy' (4), the 'Enlightenment' (3), or 'capitalism' (1).

2. The Role of the Individual

This audit reveals that the role of the individual in Australia's past is almost entirely absent from the history curriculum.

A total of just three individuals are mentioned in the 147 Australian history subjects taught in 2018.

- Charles Wentworth and Henry Lawson are mentioned in one subject
- Pauline Hanson is mentioned in three different subjects
- No Australian Prime Minister is mentioned in any subject

This reflects the notion that Australian history as a discipline is being taught as social commentary on current affairs rather than as a study of the nation's past. It also reflects the notion that historians are more interested in the collective and group identity than they are the individual.

1 Stephanie Forrest and Chris Berg, 'The end of history...in Australian Universities' (Institute of Public Affairs, 2015), p. 2

2 Bella d'Abbrera, 'The Rise of Identity Politics. An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017' (Institute of Public Affairs, 2017)

3. The Liberal Foundations of Australia's Democracy

The story of Australia's success as a modern nation based on the ideas of liberalism is omitted from the curriculum. In the 147 Australian history subjects, there is not a single mention of either the words 'liberal' or 'liberalism'.

There is no recognition of the fact Australians laid the foundations of one of the world's most successful liberal democracies which has achieved unprecedented levels of personal freedom and social equality.

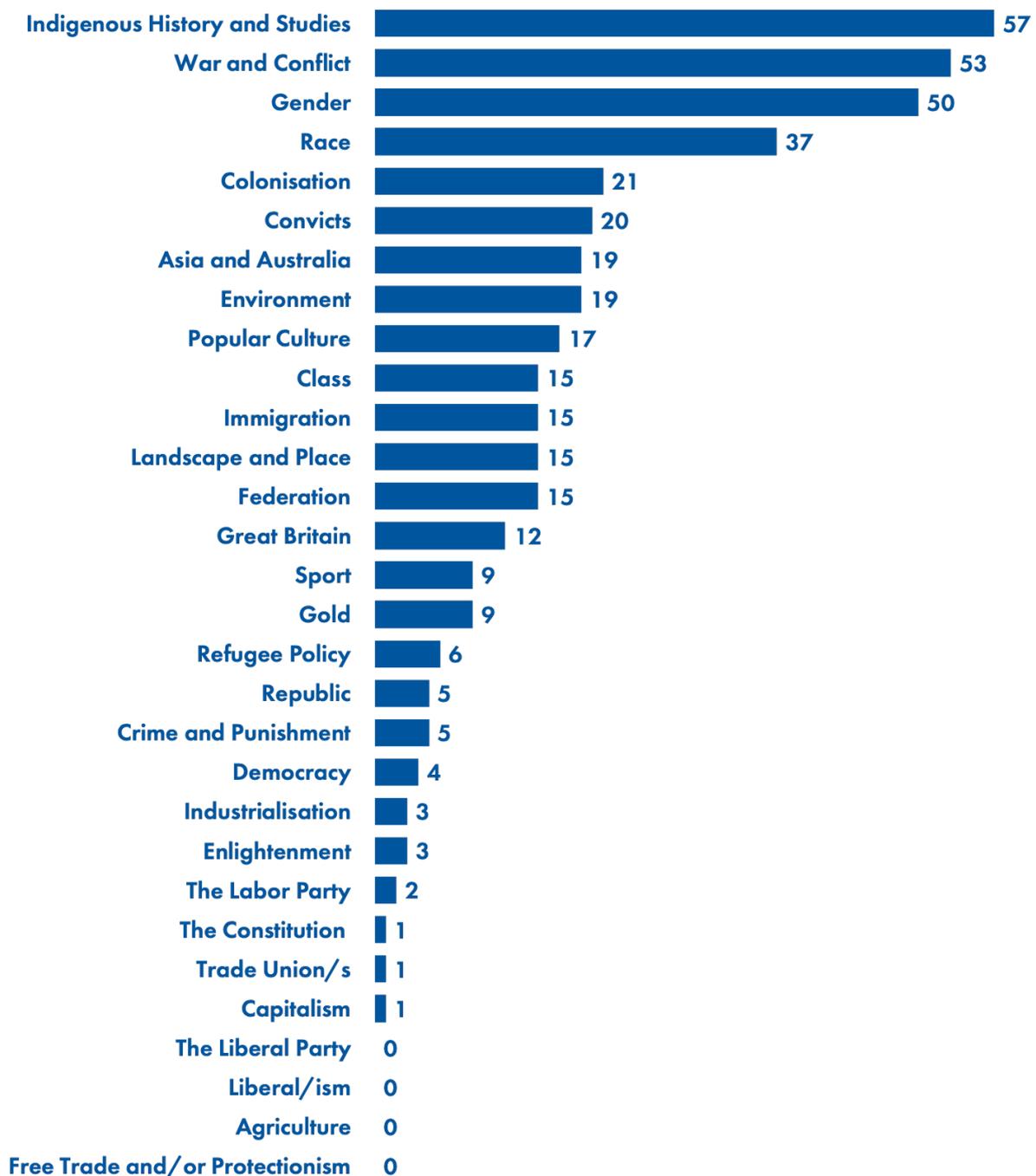
Students of Australian History are not being taught the basic concepts which explain the origins of Australian society and its successes as a modern nation.

2. The Teaching of Australian History

To determine what is being taught to students in terms of Australia’s history, the Institute of Public Affairs undertook a systematic review of all 147 Australian history subjects taught in 2018 at the 35 universities in Australia that offer undergraduate programs in history. The data was obtained from the publicly available course descriptions listed on the university websites.

Figure 1: Themes Taught in Australian History

The number of Australian history subjects which make reference to the following themes:



3. The Themes Taught in Australian History

The three most common themes which are found in the 147 Australian history subjects are 'identity politics', 'Indigenous history and studies' and 'war and conflict'. The three least common themes are 'liberal/ism', 'agriculture' and 'free trade and protectionism'. The predominance of identity politics in Australian history reflects the IPA's recent finding that identity politics dominates the teaching of history in Australian universities, where "the stunning complexity of the past is increasingly reduced...to an analysis of class, race, and gender."³

Identity Politics

For the purpose of this report into Australian history, identity politics is taken to mean two things; The first is that the individual is to be defined through either their class, race or gender. The second is that the process of politics, of history and all interactions between both individuals and groups can only be understood in terms of the group identity and inter-group conflict.

The data reveals that of the 147 Australian history subjects offered in 2018, there are 102 subjects which treat the theme of identity politics.⁴ However, of those 102 subjects, there are 13 subjects whose main focus is solely on identity politics and which are solely dedicated to a discussion of class, race, and gender. Examples of subjects in which class, race, and gender are the central themes are the following:

Sexuality in Australia, Australian National University (HIST2229)

How have the sex lives of Australians changed since the arrival of the first European settlers in the eighteenth century? And what can a study of the history of sexuality tell us about the dynamics of Australian history? This course will explore key themes in the history of sexuality in Australia since 1788, with an emphasis on ideas, attitudes, practices and identities. The evolving relationship between Australian and international developments will be a central theme. Topics to be studied will include convicts and sexuality; sexual relations on the frontier; prostitution; sexual violence; the women's movement; sex reform and sexology; the regulation of sexuality by the state; homosexuality; and the transformation of sexual cultures, ideas and practices. The course will also examine how an understanding of sexual diversity in the past can illuminate current debates in Australian society.

³ Bella d'Abbrera, 'The Rise of Identity Politics: An Audit of Australian History Teaching at Australian Universities' in 2017, p. 6

⁴ Search terms for 'race' include 'racism' and 'racist'. Search terms for 'gender' include 'feminism', 'masculinity', 'sexuality' and 'women'.

Race and Place, University of Wollongong (CST 371)

Why does race matter now? In a progressive, multicultural country such as Australia we highly value equality and therefore believe that racial heritage should not influence people's opportunities. Yet it does. In this subject students will develop an understanding of the intellectual history of 'race thinking', how it has shaped and influenced policies, popular culture and everyday life. We will critically reflect upon how 'race thinking' and racialised practices impact upon and structure major social issues and everyday cultural practices, such as environmentalism, health, law, punishment and justice, sport, art, music and ideas of home, community and nation.

History of Sexuality 1800 - the Present, Monash University (ATS3593)

This unit will examine the changing nature of sexuality in Australia, Britain and North America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The main topics will be the construction of masculinity and femininity, courtship and marriage, family and kinship, birth control, regulation in the private and public spheres, heterosexuality and homosexuality, the theorisation of sex, sexual reformers and sexual liberation movement.

Furthermore, the data reveals that in the remaining 89 subjects, the theme of identity politics, that is, class, race, and gender, is included as one of a number of themes covered. For example, in the subject entitled **Convicts and Settlers: Australia 1770s to 1870s** offered by the Australian National University, the 'major themes include... issues of race and gender on the frontier, the nature of the convict system, land possession and dispossession, and class relations for both free and unfree labour'.

At the University of Tasmania, 'the place of gender relations in shaping everyday life and political movements' is one of many themes covered in **Australia 1788 to 1901**. A subject entitled **Australian Colonial History** offered by the University of Western Sydney, explores the themes of 'colonisation, convictism, class, urbanisation, gender, land, indigenous society, culture and political developments leading to the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901.'

Indigenous History and Studies

Of the 147 Australian history subjects offered in 2018, there are 57 subjects in which 'Indigenous history and studies' feature as a theme. Of the 57 subjects, 29 are concerned solely with Indigenous history and studies.

An examination of these particular subjects reveal that most common themes are 'resistance' (9), 'colonisation' (9) and 'frontier wars' (7). For example, in **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories** offered at Australian National University, students will 'explore agency, successes and joys as well as the ways that people live with the challenges and traumas of history.'

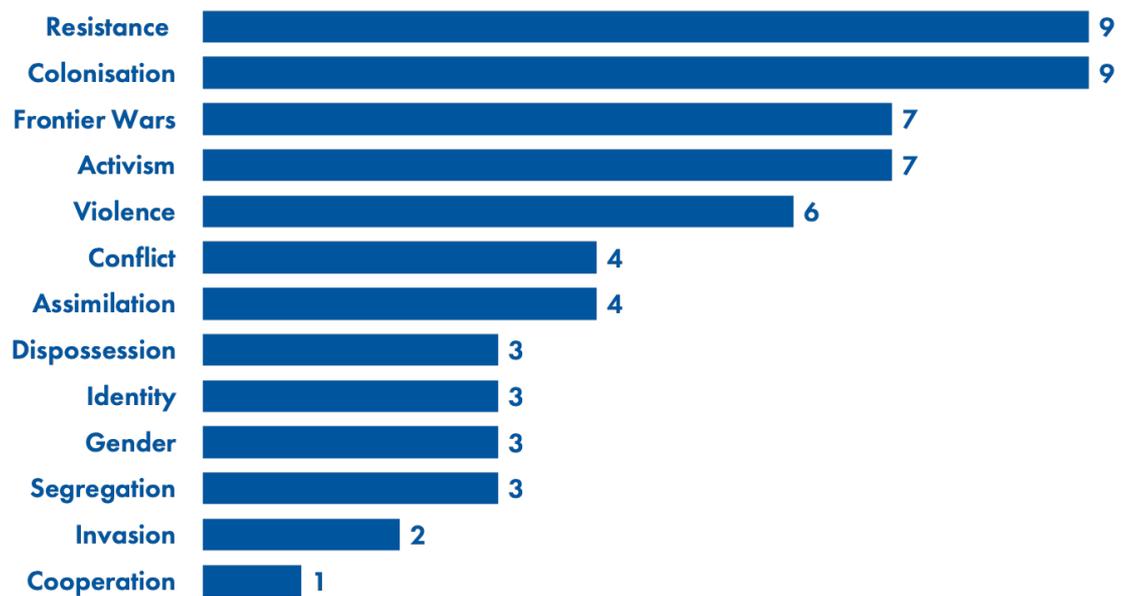
At Australian Catholic University, students studying **Global Histories: First Nations and Colonisation**, are asked the following questions: 'How did Indigenous peoples survive long periods of oppression and lack of access to land and resources? In what ways

were they required to fight back, and how did they employ various modes of resistance or self-determination?’ In **Indigenous History** offered by Federation University, students will cover ‘a bloodless war, history, historiography and the Aboriginal great tradition, First contacts: colliding traditions. Conflict on the moving frontier. Destruction and accommodation – working for the colonists. Reserves: hope then frustration.’

The focus of the 29 Indigenous History and Studies subjects therefore, appears to be on indigenous-settler relations in terms of violence and conflict rather than co-existence or co-operation.

Figure 2: Themes taught in Indigenous History and Studies

The number of subjects which make reference to the following keywords:



War and Conflict

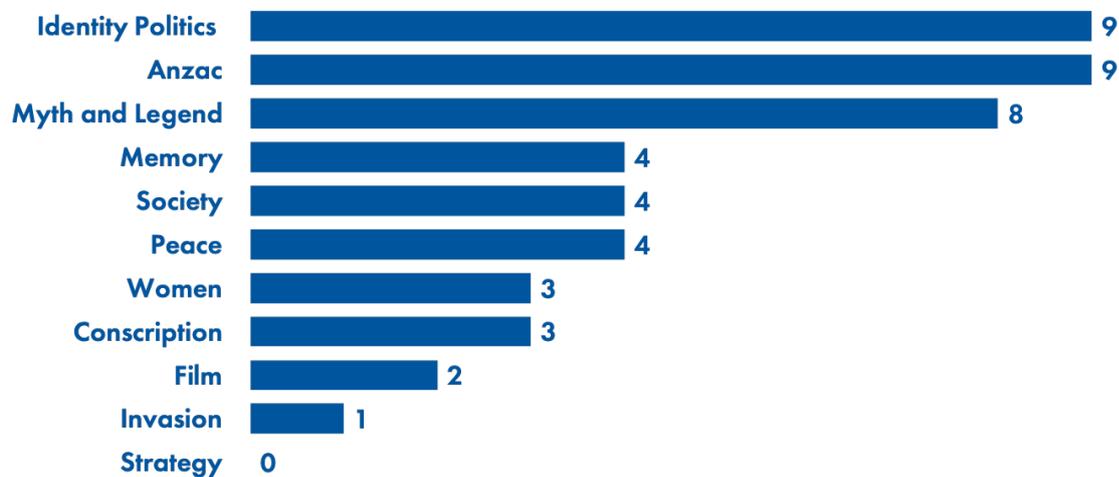
The third most common theme to emerge from this study is 'War and Conflict'. In 2018, a total of 53 subjects feature war as a theme, while there are 12 subjects which are focussed entirely on war. An analysis of the 12 subjects reveals that the themes which dominate this particular aspect of Australia's history are 'identity politics' and 'Anzac' which appear in nine subjects respectively, followed by 'myth and legend' which occur in eight of the 12 subjects.

For example, in **War and Peace** offered by Australian Catholic University, students will study 'citizenship and sacrifice, rules of war, the distinctions between civilians and combatants, memorialising, home fronts, gender and war, race and war and total war versus limited war.' At Deakin university, the unit entitled **Australia and the Two World Wars** covers 'conscription, conscientious objection and popular opposition; dissent in wartime; gender and war; aftermath of wars, including repatriation, broken bodies, broken minds, grief and loss; citizenship issues and war, ...ANZAC legend; memory of war.'

Given Australia's involvement in global conflicts, the study of war is an important aspect of Australia's history. However, the approach to the theme of war is currently dominated by identity politics as well as the themes of 'myth' and 'legend'. Currently, there is no discussion of strategy or the values and freedoms which Australians understood they were defending by participating in war.

Figure 3: Themes taught in War and Conflict

The number of subjects which make reference to the following keywords:



4. The Role of the Individual

A detailed analysis of the data reveals that there is a notable absence of the individuals' role in the development of Australia as a modern nation. A review of all 147 subjects shows that just three individuals are singled out and named. Just two subjects refer to the contribution of individuals, but not the individuals themselves. **Australian Politics, Culture and Religion since 1788** taught by Campion College, looks at the contribution of 'leading political, religious and intellectual figures to the Australian nation' while a subject offered by Charles Sturt University entitled **Australian Civics and Citizenship** examines the 'role and influence of both groups and individuals in Australian democracy.'

In 'Making Australian History' at the University of Notre Dame students contemplate 'how did the Australian people forge a new identity in the land that Wentworth called a 'New Britannia' and Henry Lawson described as a 'young tree green'?'

In contrast however Pauline Hanson is mentioned three times in three different subjects. In **Controversies in Australian History** at the University of New South Wales, students examine how 'Pauline Hanson's maiden parliamentary speech threw up competing interests and generated alternative notions of entitlement.' At Macquarie University, undergraduates enrolled in **Australian History since 1901**, will 'cover the fundamental political changes from the early years of the Labor Party, right through to the rise of the Right and Pauline Hanson on the cusp of the new millennium.' Finally, **Australia in the World 1914 to 2014** taught at the University of Melbourne, looks at 'the impact of events such as the rise of Pauline Hanson and the Tampa maritime incident; and the Global Financial Crisis.'

In addition, there are two subjects which mention both the Menzies and Whitlam governments, as well as the Hawke, Keating and Howard years. **Australia in the World** offered by the University of Adelaide examines 'the legacy of the Menzies and Whitlam Governments' and in **Forging a Nation: Australian History 1920 – Present**, offered by the University of South Australia, students study 'the end of the Menzies era and the Hawke and Keating years, pendulous swings in achievements and setbacks in Indigenous self-determination in the 1990s, dominated by the Howard era and where South Australia fits into the national narrative.'

There is no discussion of the individual contribution of these former prime ministers during their years in office. History as a discipline is being taught as a political and social commentary on current affairs rather than as a study of the nation's past. Certainly, there is little or no mention of the individual contributions which have been made by men and women to the development of Australia as a nation.

5. The Teaching of Australian History in Context

Until the latter half of the 20th century, the history of Australia was largely taught within what has been termed an 'Imperial framework.'⁵ Most Australian history, despite its ostensibly nationalist concerns, had been defined by English historiography. The national story, equally celebrated by both sides of politics, was essentially one of the transplantation of British institutions, culture, technology and people into the new land. The liberals and conservatives celebrated the development of parliamentary democracy, English law and British industriousness, while the ALP championed trade unions, the Chartists, labour parties and English-style socialism. In short, they saw the history of Australia as a late chapter in British, European and world history.

By the 1970s, this framework had all but been abandoned and it was increasingly difficult to find a historian or teacher who focussed on Australia's British origins. This shift had much to do with the influence of historian Manning Clark, who in his monumental six-volume *History of Australia* (1962-1987), reframed Australia's history in terms of the battle amongst forces of the Enlightenment, Catholicism and Protestantism. In 1976, Professor Geoffrey Blainey had added a further dimension with his *Triumph of the Nomads*, in which he relayed the story in detail of Aboriginal Australia prior to the arrival of the British.

Allan Martin, foundation Professor of history at the University of La Trobe was a leading biographer of Sir Henry Parkes and Sir Robert Menzies. While he was a life-long Labor supporter, he did not advertise this as such, because 'he took his task to be simply to get the history right.'⁶ Professor Martin found it impossible to believe that 'some readily identifiable class or party or cause can mysteriously hold in its keeping the only truth essential for understanding the whole society.'⁷ In his introduction to *The "Whig" View of Australian History and Other Essays* (2007), Martin noted that younger historians had labelled him a 'counter revolutionary' and 'bourgeois' because he had penned objective biographies of Australian politicians.

One of Martin's students, Dr John Hirst, followed him to La Trobe University, later writing *Convict Society and its Enemies* (1983) and *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy* (1988). Hirst rejected the by then orthodox version of Australian history as a popular struggle in search of national fulfilment, in favour of a story which told of a British inheritance which came with both independence and democracy, echoing Professor Martin.

In the 1990s, Marxist historian Stuart Macintyre, produced his *Concise History of Australia* (1999). Using the 'three waves of Australian history' framework (Indigenous, British, multicultural). Macintyre delivered a story of Australia's history which included

5 Stuart Macintyre, *Australia and the Empire*, 'The Oxford History of the British Empire': Vol V: Historiography, ed. Robin Winks (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 164

6 A. W. Martin 'The "Whig" View of Australian History' ed. J. R Nethercote (Melbourne University Press, 2007), p. ix

7 Ibid.

individuals, events and a narrative which culminated in forecasting the end of a recognisably British civilisation in Australia, to be replaced by one with due weight for Aboriginal culture and that of the immigrants from Asia.

While historians such as Clark, Blainey, Martin, Hirst and Macintyre might have been divided by politics, they all shared a traditional approach to the discipline of history. They saw their role with great clarity, which was to understand and study Australian society, agreeing that history is about the expanse of time in which human beings have lived and acted, that it is chronological, and that a chronological study of the past and major events should be central to history as a subject. All operated under the assumption that they were able to paint a fairly accurate picture of past events by using a linear model of historical thinking and sifting through historical evidence. All accepted that truth is objective, knowledge is instructive and that the historian's principal role is to construct a narrative using his or her professional judgement. A social mission could be built on that foundation, in the manner of (say) Macintyre, but the business of historical research and writing was fundamental.

What came next had its roots in the 1960s, when there appeared a range of radical post-structuralist and post-modernist theories invented by a group of mostly French philosophers, who rejected such notions of objective truth and knowledge.

Perhaps the most influential of these theorists insofar as history is concerned was Michel Foucault (1926-1984), philosopher, historian, social theorist and inventor of the neologism 'Power-knowledge'. His underlying ideas, derived from Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, were that neither truth nor knowledge are grounded in reality but are merely subjective constructs created by one group for the sole purpose of wielding power over another. He proposed that knowledge is power and history is fiction. Accordingly, the sole purpose for writing historical accounts is to retell the past in order that power might be reclaimed and past abuses rectified. Ultimately, the historian's role therefore, is not that of redactor, but of social commentator and political activist.

Foucault's theories were transmitted from France to the English-speaking world in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, political history became unfashionable, while subjects which treated gender and race gained popularity. Not only did he teach extensively in Brazil, Japan, and Canada, but for several years Foucault was also a visiting lecturer at the University of California. In Australia, historians were schooled in Foucauldian theory by American historian Hayden White, whose *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (1973), ostensibly educated 'an entire generation of historians...to theory and metatheory in a way no previous generation was.'⁸ White proposed that history was nothing more than myth, that there is no distinction whatsoever between truth and fiction and that history is simply a 'place of fantasy.'⁹ The past, he claimed, can be whatever the historian wants it to be. Two prominent Australian historians, Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath, conceded that Hayden White was the most influential figure in 'historical writing as writing' in this country.¹⁰

8 Bradley Bowden, 'Work, Wealth, and Postmodernism', (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 183

9 Ibid., 184

10 Ibid.

This audit reveals that the teaching of Australian history in 2018 carries all the hallmarks of Foucault's post-modernist radical theory. Australia's history has been enlisted to support political causes by academics who are more concerned with re-writing the past as a way of empowering minorities and the oppressed than they are with constructing a narrative motivated by professional rather than political concerns. Of the 147 subjects taught across 35 universities, 102 address the themes of class, race, and gender. This preoccupation with identity politics results in the exclusion of significant individuals from the curriculum, who are set aside in favour of a study of struggles between nations, social groups and institutions. While Pauline Hanson is mentioned in three difference subjects for example, not one Australian prime minister, either Labor or Liberal, is named in any of the subjects.

There is no doubt that history is distorted when it becomes a conscious vehicle for advancing contemporary political agendas. In losing this all important yet simple structure - the notion of chronology and events - history as a discipline is impoverished. In losing the instructive examples that historical knowledge provides, we lose the ability to make decisions about the present and the future because we no longer have those references from the past.

The study of the chronology and events in Australia's history is vital if we are to make informed decisions about the future. In *The Idea of History*, R G Collingwood wrote that 'History is for human self-knowledge...The only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.'¹¹

In recent years, the observation and study of events has been replaced with disconnected themes or highly specialised subjects, termed by Professor Niall Ferguson as *microcosmographia academica*.¹² Ferguson developed this term to convey the way in which this particular type of history deals with minor concerns, focussing on topics such as 'the habits of New York restaurant-goers in the 1870s or the makeup of various Caribbean ethnic groups in areas of Brooklyn that made up West Indian Day Parade in the 1960s.'¹³

In the IPA's 2015 report, *The End of History...in Australian Universities*, the authors concluded that 'general history subjects are giving way to more specialised, disconnected, thematically-based narrow issues such as imperialism, film studies, and ethnic and gender perspectives.'¹⁴ This trend was also observed in the IPA's *The Rise of Identity Politics: An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017*, in which it was revealed that undergraduates were no longer being taught about the history and substance of Western Civilisation but rather were being presented with a version of history as viewed through the narrow lens of class, race, and gender.

11 R G Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford, 1946)

12 Niall Ferguson, 'The Decline and Fall of History' remarks accepting *The Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education*, The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2016, p.17

13 Ibid.

14 Stephanie Forrest and Chris Berg, 'The end of history...in Australian Universities' (Institute of Public Affairs, 2015), p. 2

There are strong and practical grounds for the teaching of a nation's history. Without knowledge of one's own history, it is impossible to set in context the social, economic, cultural and other developments which take place in that particular society. In a recent speech delivered at an IPA function in Melbourne, *Why Western Civilisation is Our Future*, Cambridge historian Professor Robert Tombs remarked that 'ignorance of history makes democratic national conversation at best impoverished, at worst impossible.'¹⁵

Thus there is a direct correlation between the history of Australia as taught in our universities and the perception of our nation's history in the wider public discourse. The historical themes which preoccupy the academic community tend to frame public debate as well as policy decision making.¹⁶

The study of a nation's history should be transformational and enriching for both students of history and society. This leaves plenty of room for debate, but it should be taught without the aim of being polarising or divisive. There should be ample opportunity for Australians to gain an understanding of all aspects of Australia's past, both good and bad. Researchers must draw their conclusions from facts, and students should be exposed to the grand narratives before they are subjected to the vapidities of critical thinking and microhistories.

That popular books of our national history continue to sell well in Australia, particularly when they are built around the more traditional narratives of settlement, colonialism, empire, war, development, and social change, suggest there is an appetite for a history very different to that taught by the postmodernists. Those few schools still teaching recognisable Australian History are to be commended; they are making a defiant last stand, and should be supported. The rest, meanwhile, are merely teaching variations of post-modernism under the guise of history, and should cease categorising their subject as 'history'.

¹⁵ 'Why Western Civilisation is Our Future', Speech given by Professor Robert Tombs at the Sofitel Hotel, Melbourne, March 20, 2018

¹⁶ For example, in 2017, a number of Victorian Councils such as Darebin and Yarra refused to hold citizenship ceremonies or celebrate Australia Day based on the historical narrative that is propounded by many academics who specialise in Australian history.

6. Conclusion

An analysis of the 147 Australian history subjects taught across 35 Australian universities in 2018 reveals that Australia's history is being taught as politics and current affairs rather than as an examination of the past.

Australian undergraduates studying history are being politicised in the classroom through the subjects available to them. The fact that the only political figure mentioned is Pauline Hanson who appears in three subject descriptions, while there is no single mention of any important individual who has contributed towards the shaping of a nation, indicates where the priorities of historians specialising in Australian history currently lie.

A significant proportion of subjects offered as part of a degree in history belong in the disciplines of politics or sociology. They are being taught by academics who appear to see themselves as instruments of change and as political and social commentators rather than as historians. For these reasons universities should withdraw the label of 'History' from schools and subjects which are no longer within the bounds of the discipline either in research or teaching.

The choice of subjects for undergraduates who wish to further their knowledge of Australia's past is narrow, limited and is generally confined to themes rather than facts or concepts.

This does not mean to say that there is no role for such subjects, but undergraduates should be equipped with facts before they start to specialise and undertake meta-theoretical analyses. An ignorance of facts will ultimately be detrimental to the quality of the analysis.

Unfortunately, the preoccupation with identity politics - class, race, and gender - also results in fewer subjects taught which make sense of Australia both as a nation and as a society. Undergraduates are being given glimpses into the nation's past through the narrow prism of identity politics. The more time spent focussing on identity politics in the lecture theatres is less time spent learning the fundamentals of Australian history.

It is clear from a close analysis of the subjects available in 2018 that students are simply not being exposed to the key concepts that sufficiently explain Australia's development as a modern nation. There is for example, a notable dearth of subjects that discuss Australia's economic and political development since 1788. Only one subject covers the cultural conditions in Britain which led to the development of our liberal democracy, while not one Australian university offers a subject which mentions the fact the Australian nation has benefitted enormously from the Western legacy. This lack of understanding not only deprives the students of knowledge, but also impoverishes the nation.

7. Methodology

The methodology used in this audit is based on the methodology employed by Carly Millar and Mark Peel in their report *Historical Association's History Curriculum Review, 2003–04*¹⁷ which was a comprehensive review of all undergraduate history offerings in Australian and New Zealand universities. It also draws on the methodology employed in *The Rise of Identity Politics; An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017*¹⁸

The subject descriptions of all 147 subjects on offer were analysed by themes. To determine the number of subjects that teach particular themes, those themes were identified as keywords, and the occurrence of these keywords in either the name of the subject, or the course description was recorded. So for example, the keyword 'war' appears in either the name or the description of the content, or both, in 53 subjects.

¹⁷ Carly Millar and Mark Peel, *Australian Historical Association 2003-4 History Curriculum Review: Final Report to the Aha Executive* (Australian Historical Association, 2004)

¹⁸ Bella d'Abbrera, *The Rise of Identity Politics: An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017* (Institute of Public Affairs, 2017)

About the Foundations of Western Civilisation Program

In 2010, the Institute of Public Affairs established the Foundations of Western Civilisation Program as one of its major research programs. Its purpose is to encourage Australians to understand and appreciate the heritage of Western Civilisation.

About the author

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She is the author of a number of academic works and scholarly articles and specialises in education and skills, faith and society and culture, ideas and liberty and Western Civilisation. She appears frequently in the media and is a regular contributor to *The Australian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Herald Sun* and the *Spectator Australia*. She was the author of ‘The Rise of Identity Politics: An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017.’

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