



**HOW
TO
START
A
FREE
UNIVERSITY**



A
GUIDE
BY
THE



MELBOURNE FREE UNIVERSITY



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JASMINE-KIM WESTENDORF

AURELIEN MONDON

GERHARD HOFFSTAEDTER

(Co-founders, Melbourne Free University)





Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught.

People teach each other, mediated by the world.

≈ *Freire*

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

≈ *Freire*

The government does not owe the people education for the simple reason that one does not owe the people what it can take for itself. And education is like liberty: it is not given, it is taken.

≈ *Ranciere*

Dare to know.

≈ *Horace*

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THE INS AND OUTS OF FREE UNIVERSITIES

WHAT IS A FREE UNIVERSITY? THE POLITICS AND THE PURPOSE

A free university provides a platform for learning, discussion and debate that is open to everyone, and acts as an alternative to the formalised education sector.

There is a long tradition of free universities around the world: from Europe to Latin America, Australia to the USA. They vary greatly in terms of how they're organized, what courses or learning opportunities they offer, how they are run, where they are based, and whether or not they are institutionally or otherwise affiliated. What they share is the belief that education can and should be more than what currently dominates the increasingly commercially-driven and outcome-oriented tertiary education system.

A free university is a space created by a community for the sharing of knowledge, and as such must respond to the needs and dynamics of its audience, rather than replicate a particular template.

Free universities rest on the assertion that another educational reality is possible. They challenge the hierarchies of knowledge that dominate traditional universities, creating an alternative space in which the exchange of different types and levels of knowledge is possible.

This inherently implies that knowledge is not restricted to academic knowledge, but takes many forms. The particular types of knowledge activists and professionals have, or the knowledge generated by the lived experience of certain issues, such as the refugee experience or mental illness, offer equally valid contributions to learning and discussion.

While traditional universities are essential parts of our society, they are increasingly outcome-oriented: many students are discouraged from seeing the university experience as an exploratory one. Instead, they are advised to make

SNAPSHOT:

Justin Clemens (*Lecturer*)

Real education – as opposed to qualification – is and should be free. What does 'free' mean here? It means: come together, participate, change ourselves, in a way that depends upon you. Any organisation founded on this principle is doing the right thing, and you can experience it for yourself in the diversity and quality of the discussions.

The MFU was founded in Melbourne in 2010, and is the first free university established in Australia since the 1960s and 1970s.

SNAPSHOT:

Jem Atahan (*Participant, course coordinator, administrator*)

Why a free university in a country with government supported tertiary education? That was my first reaction on hearing of the MFU. I have come around, though, and it's because the MFU isn't at all like any university I have attended. Mostly this is because there are no bored, inattentive students half listening to remote academic voices. At its best, an MFU session is like a collaborative project that brings together informed perspectives and interested citizens to tackle questions in which all are invested, and to which none have an answer. I've even come away from sessions thinking the world was a little bit better a place as a result. So go forth and start another free university, although maybe don't call it a university, it's got all the wrong connotations. Call it a discussion group, or a speaker's corner, or anything that doesn't remind me of those cold, dead eyes.

sure that their education is not a 'waste of money'. They can't afford to 'lose' years studying something that might not offer good employment opportunities. This perspective is reinforced by the increasingly high price of tertiary education, which limits its basic accessibility. Emancipation - or self-discovery and empowerment through knowledge - is undervalued, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake ranks low in many students' motivations to study.

This mainstream form of tertiary education is further limiting in that it reinforces hierarchies such as the master/student dichotomy. Instead of providing a space for critical, original and radical analysis, and the mutual exploration of ideas, the learning environment encourages conformity and deference to the authority of the teacher.

A free university asserts that emancipatory education does not need to be granted by

the state or the system, but only requires the creation and maintenance of a space in which knowledge and ideas can be freely shared amongst equals. This space is not given: it has to be established and occupied. It has often been said in emancipatory struggles that the oppressed should not wait to have their freedom granted: they have a responsibility to take and uphold it. Similarly, education is not given, it is taken.

Teaching, as an emancipatory exercise, is not meant to explain to the student what they cannot understand without explanation; this form of teaching shares knowledge on an equal footing, with the teacher a willing participant in the learning process. Education is open to anyone who puts their mind to it. We will not all learn the same things at the same pace. But we are all able to think, learn and discuss whatever we apply our minds to; we are all able to share and exchange knowledge freely and equally. And this is what a free university is for.

TEACHING WITHOUT KNOWING:

THE STORY OF JOSEPH JACOTOT

The principles of intellectual emancipation are not new. Breaking the dichotomy between student and teacher was central to the global 1960s movements. It was also central to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the early 1970s. Similarly, French philosopher Jacques Rancière based the premise of his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* on a ground-breaking experiment led by Joseph Jacotot in the early nineteenth century.

Jacotot was forced into exile by the counter revolutionary forces in 1815 and went on to teach in a Dutch university. While his Dutch-speaking students were eager to hear what the French-speaking scientist could teach them, language became simultaneously what prevented them from communicating and, more importantly, the inadvertent precursor to a great experiment in emancipation. Jacotot gave each of his students a bilingual version of a book, asking those truly interested in his science to come back once they had mastered the French language. To his surprise, a few weeks later, many students came back with an impressive level of French. This left the teacher with revolutionary questions: 'Was will more important than ability? Was every man virtually able to understand what others had done and understood?'

Jacotot's experiment proved it was possible to reverse the oppressive order present in the teacher/student relationship; it disproved the common assumption of the explanation as necessary. In fact, explanation theories were uncovered

for what they mostly were: tools of domination. 'To explain something to someone is to imply they are not able to understand it on their own.' The explanation was the mythical cornerstone 'of a world divided into learned and ignorant, able and disabled, intelligent and stupid minds.'

Acknowledging will as the key to ability made the inherent equality of intelligence a logical conclusion. If Jacotot's students were able to learn French, it was because they had the will to understand what Jacotot had to say, but more importantly the will to partake in a conversation, in an equal conversation. As such, 'this method of equality was first and foremost a method of will. One could learn on one's own, without an explanatory master, when one wanted it, by the sheer force of one's own desire or by the constraint of the situation.'

Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder.

Rancière, J. (1991) *The ignorant schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

WHAT IS THE MELBOURNE FREE UNIVERSITY?

The Melbourne Free University is based upon the principles of emancipatory education: anyone can learn, if they want to. The MFU offers a space for personal, self-motivated engagement with knowledge in a diverse range of subject areas.

The MFU is not a replacement for formal universities. It offers a different way to engage with knowledge, and is open to everyone.

The MFU runs courses in areas such as philosophy, politics, history, law, development, and the arts on a weekly basis. These courses and seminars take place in community spaces including bars, cafes, neighbourhood houses and bookshops. The MFU was established by a collective in 2010 with the objective of establishing an open platform for learning, discussion and debate in Melbourne. Since then, it has consistently run up to two courses concurrently, in addition to an ad hoc special seminar series. It has involved speakers ranging from early career and established academics to community leaders, enthusiasts, activists, people with lived experience, and many others. The MFU audience has been equally diverse. MFU sessions vary in terms of their format, but generally include a lecture and an open discussion of equal length.

The MFU does not offer certification. Instead the MFU focuses on delivering and partaking in knowledge for its own sake and the realisation that anyone can learn if they have the will to. Anyone can participate in sessions – the MFU doesn't ask for RSVPs, course enrolment, or fees.

The MFU upholds the principle of 'no money in, no money out,' which means that all our resources are donated to us. This ensures our autonomy from political parties and organisations, governments, private bodies, universities and NGOs.

However, the MFU does not claim to be unbiased. It stands for radical equality, and the possibility for everyone to pursue knowledge on their own terms.

This is exemplified through our style of learning, which challenges the dichotomy between teacher and learner, or speaker and audience. Equal time is afforded to both, recognising the value of both the speaker's expertise and the audience's own knowledge and experiences.

The lectures are only the first step of the learning process at the MFU: they give the audience a basis for an open discussion, and an opportunity to challenge perceptions. This discussion is, in itself, an act of emancipation.

See our course outlines below on p.21



THINK DISCUSS ACT



THE MFU'S PRINCIPLES

- The Free University combines the academic rigour of a traditional university with the open discussions of a philosophical salon.
- The Free University stands for radical equality: the *a priori* belief in universal equality and the possibility of emancipation.
- The Free University is free and accessible. It remains politically and economically autonomous from political parties and organisations, government, private bodies, universities and NGOs.
- The Free University is based on the belief that people have the responsibility to seek and engage with knowledge. Learning is an act of will and empowerment.
- The Free University is an alternative to the exclusive and outcome orientated education sector, enabling the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and thereby freedom.



Who can start a free university?

Anyone. All it takes is commitment to the ideals of free and open education, and a willingness to work hard to create an alternative space for the pursuit of knowledge and discussion in your community.

How can I start a free university?

Easy. We have everything you need to know in this nifty little manual.

What we will do is take you through the issues you'll need to consider and questions you'll need to ask yourself when setting up a free university in your community.

The most important thing to remember is that every free university is different, and creativity will be essential to creating a free university in your community, one which doesn't just replicate what has been done elsewhere, but responds to the needs and dynamics of the people you hope will attend.

Because every community is different there can be no step-by-step-guide, but we'll share our experiences with you – things we've found hard, things we've found useful, solutions we've discovered and so on. And we'll also share the thoughts of others involved in the MFU as participants, speakers, supporters and coordinators.

PRACTICALITIES

PEOPLE

At the start:

It is good to start your free university project with a few people who are willing to commit the time and effort necessary, and more importantly, who can work well together. You can develop a larger group in the longer run, but in the beginning, working with a smaller group may be easier and more efficient.

Find a vision for your free university that your small group shares and is comfortable working towards.

The MFU was started by three friends, which made decision-making and working as a team easier than amongst people without an established relationship. Small groups are often able to make urgent decisions more quickly than larger ones, and are able to be more responsive to the changing needs of the organization.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A COLLECTIVE:

- |+|+|→ A shared vision
- |+|→ A good relationship
- |+|→ The ability to make collective decisions effectively
- |+|+|→ Trust

The group should be able to make decisions and implement them in a smooth and efficient manner. Relationships matter. The development of a free university happens on a day-to-day basis, and decisions often have to be made quickly in response to new challenges and opportunities.

You'll be relying on your own personal networks a lot at the beginning of this process, because they are more likely to support you in your endeavour – trust is crucial.

SNAPSHOT:

Morgan Macdonald
(Participant,
course coordinator)

I really enjoyed my time coordinating "Refugee Realities" and it was a great opportunity to explore issues I'm interested in. At first it was difficult to find speakers, but as soon as I had all the dates filled it became much easier and I found myself really looking forward to coming in each week.



Good administration is crucial to the success of your free university. Your administrative person or team is the vital link between the public and you. They will be in contact with people interested in attending, giving lectures, coordinating or offering criticisms, and so they need to be able to deal with a range of people and issues. Administrative tasks also include sending out email updates, managing social media, and supporting the media campaign. This takes up a surprising amount of time, and it is not always a very rewarding task – make sure that you devote enough energy and resources to it.

When you need to ‘grow’

Realistically, a free university can't be sustained by just a small group of people over a long period of time. You will get tired! As the free university grows, you'll need more professional skills, more lecturers, more administrative help... in short, you'll need more people. However, be aware that more people may mean more work for you, at least initially. Managing people takes time and skills – you will develop these, but it may be hard work at first.



Your free university will grow in different ways. You can send out emails through your networks and over time establish a free university email list through your website. Emails and lists are useful to appeal for support, and people who are interested in working with your free university may contact you offering their skills and assistance.

Sometimes these people will offer to teach certain courses and other times they'll be offering administrative or other support. Watch out though – don't feel that you need to take help from everyone. Try to identify where people can actually fit into your organisation, and whether their skills match your needs. For those you think might be good additions to your team, either bring them on immediately, or keep a list of their offer and keep them updated of how you think you can bring them into the team in the future.

The convenors of the free university will likely be responsible for all decision-making and organisational matters, at least in the initial stages. As your team grows, you may have to consider management structures and hierarchies, and re-evaluate how decisions get made within the group. You may want to encourage volunteers to play a greater role in decision-making processes, and take ownership over their responsibilities. Remember that the free university belongs to the community: make space for them to participate in discussions about how it runs and develops.



SNAPSHOT:

Felicity Grey

(Lecturer, course coordinator)

I've been involved in a few sessions on the topic of mental health, specifically drawing on the insights of those of us diagnosed with "mental illness" (often called "mental health consumer/survivors"). I was drawn to the Melbourne Free University because it offers a generative, transformative space: informed, challenging conversations are held, drawing on a variety of "ways of knowing," bringing together rigorous intellectual thinking with a diversity of lived experiences, deeply held ethical positions and intuitive reflections. Spaces such as this are transformative as they destabilise hegemonic, disempowering ideas about "expertise," and open up, deepen and challenge our thinking.



SNAPSHOT:

Tyson Namow

(Participant, course coordinator)

I participated in the Melbourne Free University (MFU) because I was attracted to the idea of delivering scholarly content in a non-academic, non-institutionalised context that would allow for free and open discussion with people from various cultural and educational backgrounds. I also thought it would be a good way to gain personal experience coordinating a film course for the public.

I see the MFU as contributing to the creation of a civil, public sphere that promotes critical discussion and which can hopefully challenge certain intellectual and cultural orthodoxies. I also think it provides a forum for those working within the academy to try to reach a wider audience not necessarily versed in the vocabulary of specific disciplines.

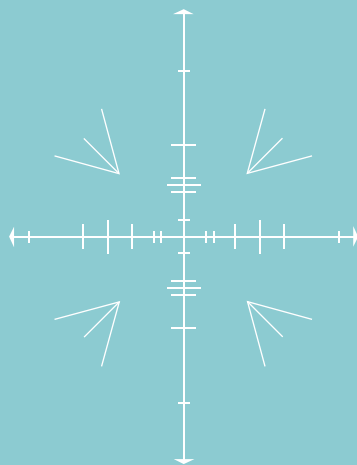
I have enjoyed my time with the MFU. The course I coordinated was quite successful and afforded me an opportunity to participate in an important civic and cultural activity while also developing a number of organisational skills.

VOLUNTEERS

At the MFU, we sent out position descriptions for several volunteer positions after 6 months. These set out what the tasks would be, how much time was required and how they fit into the MFU structure. The response was overwhelming. We filled all positions, which included a webmaster, PR coordinator, outreach coordinator, admin assistant and a graphic designer. We had to be flexible to shape the tasks to suit the skills, interests and capacities of the applicants. The benefits of this approach are that people understand what their role within the organisation is and that they are committed to it.

However, the nature of volunteerism is that this doesn't always work out. People over-commit, drop out for personal reasons, or don't form working relationships with the rest of the team. You have to be flexible – like you, these are volunteers and they give up their time for this project. When working with volunteers, leadership is important and those who started the project are often required to pick up the slack when others don't fulfil all of their responsibilities. Be prepared!

As your team grows, more people will (hopefully) be coordinating courses. While they will bring their own ideas and share the work-load, it is important to be clear with your course coordinators about what they should expect and what their responsibilities are. A document outlining these responsibilities might be a good way to avoid misunderstandings. Coordinators are volunteers, so you cannot ask too much of them. It is vitally important to let them know what they are in charge of and what you will provide. For instance, coordinators may be in charge of designing a course, finding speakers, and moderating sessions, while you may be responsible for organizing a venue, promotion, admin support, and general advice.



AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTATIONS



When you start a free university, you'll have to ask yourself what you hope to achieve. While part of your motivation will be creating a space for open and free education, there may be other factors driving your pursuit. For instance, you might want to provide an educational space for a particular segment of your community, such as immigrants, or in a particular discipline. Your free university may be a long-term endeavour – you may aim to establish an institution that will

eventually be sustainable, or your goals might be more short-term. If you have long-term ambitions for the project, you'll have to consider how much you want it to grow. Although growth has benefits, it will increase your workload, and necessitate a broader network of supporters. Similarly, you might want to consider the length of your own involvement in the project, and if and when you should hand over control to a different team, or the community.

At the MFU we realised that the main goal was not to attract a huge audience, but to foster vibrant discussions. Sometimes a smaller audience can have a better discussion than a larger one, as people can feel more comfortable sharing their ideas in smaller groups. However, audience diversity remains central to our aim, which necessitates a certain amount of growth. We also realised that with our limited initial resources we couldn't run courses on as many topics as we would have liked to, but now, after two years, we are increasing the number of people involved in the project so that we can diversify the topics on offer. We decided to run two courses concurrently, so that we could reach a broader audience, and we haven't increased this frequency because we didn't want to exhaust our audience, speakers and ourselves. We also decided to focus on one geographical area rather than expanding into other parts of the city, in order not to overstretch our resources.

A free university must respond to its community's needs and interests, for instance by running courses on topics of current popular interest. But it is also important to go beyond what is already being discussed by creating new and novel spaces for issues and sources of knowledge that receive little attention in the media or traditional universities. Think broadly and creatively about what these might be, and how you might open up discussions on them.

Your audience and speakers may have different expectations of what they'll get out of the free university experience. However, a successful session should leave everyone feeling challenged and satisfied by the discussion.

It is also important to have realistic expectations of how many people you will attract to your sessions at the outset of your project. While numbers may initially be small, this doesn't mean that you shouldn't have big dreams for what you'd like your free university to become.

SNAPSHOT:

Liz Conor (*Lecturer*)

An evening spent with Melbourne Free University, revives the traditions of Habermas' coffee-house society and the salons of the eighteenth century. It is to experience the public sphere before Packer and Murdoch got to it and tipped its content of political engagement, rational-critical debate and utopian imaginings down their gluttonous gullets and regurgitated it as tantruming, self-interested, enforced consensus. MFU is intellectual sorbet - a palate cleanser after the dregs of concentrated tabloitiariat have been involuntarily consumed.

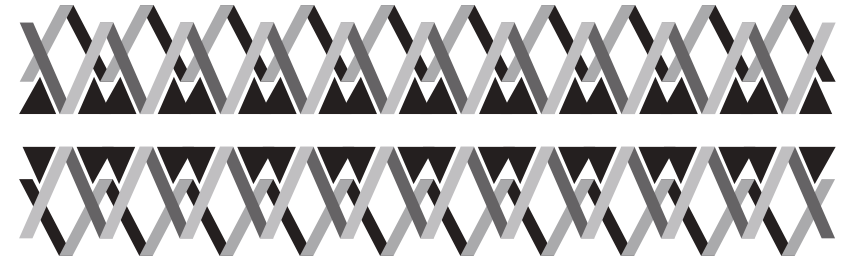
SNAPSHOT:

Geraldine Robertson
(*Participant*)

Melbourne Free University? It gives me the choice to make the effort to attend and be rewarded by coming in touch with new people and new ideas in a comfortable and relaxed environment. Also, these are ideas that have been developed within a context and are presented and defended in person. I leave MFU feeling thoughtful and stimulated - often smiling.

Otherwise, of course, I can go online and be perhaps assaulted with a plethora of opinions and prejudices that leave me drained, disconnected and depressed. There is no choice. Congratulations to all at MFU.

AUDIENCE



Who is your target audience? This is a question you'll need to think about before you start your free university, and you might find that your answer to it changes as time goes on. The audience will reflect the course topics, location, time, speaker, and a range of other factors that are out of your control, like the weather.

In searching for your audience, it is important to be realistic without being exclusive. Recognise that it will take time to build up the diversity of your audience base. But don't fall into the trap of providing just for your initial audience - be ambitious! Run courses on topics you think will attract a broader audience, or will challenge your community. In other words: be creative, but also be responsive to what your community wants to talk about. Take cues from discussions dominating the media while offering your audience new perspectives - this will bring people in.

When we started the MFU, we hoped to reach a wide audience beyond university students, although we have found that these make up a large part of our audience. We wanted to reach immigrant communities and those from low socio-economic backgrounds, who haven't as much access to education opportunities, as well as workers and professionals who want the opportunity to keep engaging with new ideas. However, structural barriers have so far prevented us from reaching the people most removed from educational opportunities, such as refugees.

SNAPSHOT: Jane Griffith (Participant)

I am a 47 year old single mother who did not complete year twelve and who has been out of the paid work force for seventeen years. When I heard about the MFU, I felt that this was something I wanted to try. Education is something that affects all of us. We never stop learning, but how often do we stop to think about how we learn? We send our kids to school; we hope they will do well enough to go to university. We extol the virtues of reading and curiosity, but we rarely think about what this thing is that we consume. We get caught up in a culture of score keeping and accountability. Attending MFU lectures has been a revelation for me. Here we have education that is completely accessible, not just because it is free, but because it is offered with such generosity that the process of learning becomes a process of sharing. The guest lecturer shares their knowledge with us and we share our responses with them. We are allowed to discriminate and process at our own pace. We are not assessed, or judged.

I heard about the MFU via an interview on the radio. I was keen to expand my experiences and learn just for the sake of it. I love my weekly sessions at the MFU. They have given me a quiet confidence and sense of community. I join in the discussions; my opinions are respected and expanded. I do not think I am typical of other attendees, but this is what is most attractive about the format. The subjects are as diverse as the participants. I would say the diversity and accessibility are the keys to its success. One piece of advice I would like to offer: When deciding on a course to attend, try something that doesn't necessarily fit in with your current interests as those topics have been some of the most rewarding for me.

While audience numbers may be quite low to begin with, creating the space for a conversation is what really matters. Try to have realistic expectations of how many people you will attract at the beginning of your initiative.

While it might be disheartening to you and your lecturer when not many people show up, you will be surprised at the level and intensity of discussion, even with low audience numbers. The people who do come will be there because they really want to be. And eventually, your audience will grow: you just need to build up your profile. In the meantime, it is important to focus on the quality of sessions, and encourage audience participation. If people get a lot out of a session, they'll tell their friends and come back. Word of mouth is essential to building community support for your free university.

Don't expect a huge audience when you start your free university. At the MFU, we started with quite low audiences (sometimes only 4 or 5 people), but we kept running them because we thought it was important to create the space for discussion on particular issues. Courses that start with a few people might end up attracting many, or you could re-run them when you've built up your audience base. Don't despair!

VENUES

Make sure to create a friendly and comfortable setting that is conducive to open discussion.

We found a half circle is a good way to organize a room as it facilitates more audience interaction during discussion time.

The venues you use will influence the kind of audience you attract. Try to find free venues that are close to transport links, but also have community links you can build on. For instance, neighbourhood houses or community centres will be able to promote your courses in the community.

However, venues like this might not suit all your sessions – some might be better held in bars, cafes, pubs or restaurants, where people can have something to eat or drink during the session, to create a more social environment.

Other options include bookshops, or universities and schools. While many free universities do operate out of school and university buildings, you may not want to link your free university to the formal education sector, and might prefer a more casual space.

You might find it useful to organize a microphone and public address (PA) system (some venues will have them on site) as some venues will be noisy and

some speakers may speak in a soft voice. Be aware that using a PA can change the dynamic of a session, particularly if the audience is small and new to the free university style of open discussion.

Try to find a venue that offers free liability insurance for community based organisations and projects. You'll have to check the legal requirements in your area. We found that bars and public venues are often covered and will cover your legal liability.

SOME OF OUR CONSIDERATIONS WHEN FINDING A VENUE WERE:

- the atmosphere (many enjoyed conversations at a pub over a drink)
- accessibility to public transport
- parking
- warmth (winters in Melbourne are cold!)
- access to community
- We settled for a bar/café and a neighbourhood house. When the neighbourhood house turned out to be too far from public transport and a little too formal, we shifted to a nearby bar

COURSES

When thinking about how you are going to run your courses, remember that you are not a traditional university and can be flexible with your curriculum and format. Running short courses of about 4-6 weeks gives you the ability to cover a range of topics without exhausting speakers and

the audience. Try to get a diverse group of speakers for each course – this might mean that each lecture is given by a different person. Also remember that you can run follow-up courses and ask lecturers to speak again if a particular topic is popular.

When you begin to run courses, consider running them on issues that are of interest to your community *and* that you think you will be able to find speakers for. It's okay to stick with what you know at the start: if you work or are interested in social issues, run a course on that, and if you have knowledge of philosophy, start there. You don't have to run a lot of courses at once: you just have to run them as best you can.


At the MFU, our courses have focused largely on politics, philosophy and contemporary issues, many of which are under attack in the traditional university sector. These topics also relate to larger questions about society and the world, which tend to challenge the audience's preconceived ideas.

During the first year at the MFU, the majority of courses we ran were on topics that we were already engaged in, researching, or had worked on. This meant that we had a wide network of people to call upon as speakers. We also found it useful to start with two special seminars on popular issues to gauge community response and to build up an audience base.

It might be useful to start with a few special seminars before you launch your courses. These could address current issues being debated in the media and your society. You could use these seminars to gauge community interest in different issue areas, and in the free university project as a whole.

There is a bit of a 'chicken or the egg' question when deciding which topics to start with. In the beginning, you have to decide what you think the community might respond to and engage with, and also what debates have been neglected and would benefit from being covered at your free university. Later you can let community-demand drive decisions on which courses you'll run.

MELBOURNE
FREE
UNIVERSITY



FIRST SEMESTER 2011

I ♥ PHILOSOPHY

This course grapples with big issues and key thinkers in philosophy. Topics are broad and diverse and meant to engage people with the big topics, paradoxes and conundrums.

SEMESTER BEGIN: 14.2.2011

DURATION: 6 weeks, Wednesdays 4.30 pm - 8 pm

LOCATION: Center Cafe and Bar, 123 Queens Parade, Clifton Hill.

FORMAT: 45 minutes presentation, 45 minutes discussion

RACISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This course will provide a variety of approaches to better understand the concept of racism in the 21st century. Lecturers will look with history, theory and practice.

SEMESTER BEGIN: 17.2.2011

DURATION: 6 weeks, Wednesdays 4.30 pm - 8 pm

LOCATION: North Carlton Railway Station Neighbourhood House, 23 Solly Ave near Park St, North Carlton

FORMAT: 45 minutes presentation, 45 minutes discussion

WEEK 1: 14.2.2011 John Cash Melbourne University On Fraud and Insecurity	WEEK 4: 9.3.2011 Jessica Whyte Monash University On Commentators and Zizek	WEEK 1: 17.2.2011 Aurelien Monin La Trobe University Racism: A History	WEEK 4: 10.3.2011 Shauna Rossiter Melbourne University Islam in Australia
WEEK 2: 23.2.2011 Jack Reynolds La Trobe University On Derrida and Hospitality	WEEK 5: 14.3.2011 Philippa Rothfield La Trobe University On Nietzsche and the body	WEEK 2: 24.2.2011 Emma Kennel Melbourne University Whiteness and Indigeneity	WEEK 5: 15.3.2011 Sheila Jeffreys Melbourne University Racialised Sexual Exploitation
WEEK 3: 2.3.2011 Conrad Woodworth Melbourne University On Popper and the margins of science	WEEK 6: 23.3.2011 Adam Bartlett Melbourne University On Buddha and education	WEEK 3: 3.3.2011 TFC Fan Discum Session: Race and the Contemporary Australian Far Right	WEEK 6: 24.3.2011 Yin Paradise Melbourne University The Impact of Racism in Australia

WWW.MELBOURNEFREEUNIVERSITY.ORG

SNAPSHOT:

Clovis Mwamba (*Participant, lecturer*)

The MFU is an amazing laboratory of human analyses and studies. It aims at sharing knowledge, and hence is a wonderful rewarding experience. Each might teach and also learn from the other, for the sake of the knowledge or not, and each mostly learns to think out of the square and take action, if needed.

The MFU offers a realm of knowledge above all formal institutional restraints. As a window of diversity it sheds light, and therefore may promote a new vision of adequate and balanced international cooperation. Its values of respect, tolerance, and compassion are still in need in our changing and economically unjust and polluted world, by both developed countries and developing ones. Thanks to the MFU views, opinions, perspectives and theories are diversely shared. Its intergenerational audience from such a worldwide background has a free say and is welcome.

We started by running two half-day seminars over two months. Each seminar included two 1.5 hour sessions. These were panel discussions with four speakers on each panel, and time for open discussion.

OUR FIRST SESSIONS WERE:

- Australia's Role in the World
- Race Relations in Australia
- Universal Differences?
- Religious Truth Claims

Panels can be a great way to start courses at your free university, because they engage the panellists and their networks in promoting your new courses to a wide audience. They also allow you to canvass a broad range of ideas in a single session,

which provides a good basis for a vibrant discussion. Remember that there are many ways to format your sessions – for instance, you could run them as workshops, lectures, discussions, walking tours, or skills trainings. We'll discuss this more in the next section.

As your free university grows, new people will offer to lecture and/or coordinate courses. This is a great opportunity for you to broaden your curriculum and to share the load of running the free university. While the initial organizing team will probably coordinate the first courses out of necessity, try to allow others to take responsibility and ownership of courses as time goes on.

Plan ahead for your courses. This is especially important if you have a number of people offering to coordinate courses – you'll need to decide which courses would complement each other if running concurrently, or which would work well running in sequence.

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FIRST SEMESTER 2011

I ♥ PHILOSOPHY
This course grapples with big issues and key thinkers in philosophy. Topics are broad and diverse and meant to engage people with the big topics, paradoxes and conundrums.

RACISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY
This course will provide a variety of approaches to better understand the concept of racism in the 21st century. Lectures will deal with theory, theory and practice.

SEMESTER BEGIN: 16.2.2011
DURATION: 4 weeks, Wednesdays 6.30 pm - 8 pm
LOCATION: Recipe Cafe and Bar, 133 Queens Parade, Clifton Hill
FORMAT: 45 minutes presentation, 45 minutes discussion

SEMESTER BEGIN: 17.2.2011
DURATION: 4 weeks, Thursdays (week 1 a combined) 6.30 pm - 8 pm
LOCATION: North Carlton Railway Station, Heidelberg Road, 20 Selby Ave (near Park St), North Carlton
FORMAT: 45 minutes presentation, 45 minutes discussion

WEEK 1: 16.2.2011 John Cook Melbourne University On Freedom and Democracy	WEEK 4: 9.3.2011 Janice White Monash University On Communication	WEEK 2: 17.2.2011 Kathleen Meehan La Trobe University Racism in Australia	WEEK 5: 16.3.2011 Shelia Hoggan Melbourne University Rationalised Sexual Coercitation
WEEK 3: 23.2.2011 Jack Reynolds La Trobe University On Diversity and Inequality	WEEK 6: 16.3.2011 Shirley Kinnear La Trobe University On Medicine and the Body	WEEK 4: 24.2.2011 Lorna Knox Melbourne University Philosophy and Ideology	WEEK 7: 24.2.2011 Vic Peoples Melbourne University The Impact of Racism in Australia
WEEK 2: 23.2.2011 Richard Wainwright Melbourne University On Pepper and the margins of science	WEEK 5: 23.2.2011 Alan Beckett Melbourne University On Business and Education	WEEK 3: 23.2.2011 T.C. Fair Clashes Racism: Race and the Contemporary Australian Post Right	

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FIRST SEMESTER 2011

WAR AND PEACE
Against the current context of violent conflicts in the world, speakers will ask and discuss questions around why conflicts last why we lose wars why we win, and how they can be avoided or ended.

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH
Speakers from the global South will explain what is meant by 'the post-9/11' for local, national and global communities by sharing their own first-hand experiences and stories.

SEMESTER BEGIN: 16.2.2011
DURATION: 4 weeks, 6.30 pm - 8 pm
LOCATION: Recipe Cafe and Bar, 133 Queens Parade, Clifton Hill
FORMAT: 45 minutes presentation, 45 minutes discussion

SEMESTER BEGIN: 17.2.2011
DURATION: 4 weeks, Thursdays (week 1 a combined) 6.30 pm - 8 pm
LOCATION: North Carlton Railway Station, Heidelberg Road, 20 Selby Ave (near Park St), North Carlton
FORMAT: 45 minutes presentation, 45 minutes discussion

WEEK 1: 16.2.2011 Janice Beckett On Wars and ending them	WEEK 4: 16.3.2011 Vic Peoples On peace and non-violent change	WEEK 2: 17.2.2011 Kathleen Meehan On the state and community	WEEK 5: 16.3.2011 Shelia Hoggan On Human Rights
WEEK 3: 23.2.2011 Jack Reynolds On Culture and Capital resolution	WEEK 6: 16.3.2011 Shirley Kinnear On tradition, identity and gender	WEEK 4: 24.2.2011 Lorna Knox On Development	
WEEK 2: 23.2.2011 Richard Wainwright On Pepper and the margins of science	WEEK 5: 23.2.2011 Alan Beckett On Business and Education	WEEK 3: 23.2.2011 T.C. Fair Clashes Racism: Race and the Contemporary Australian Post Right	

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FIRST SEMESTER 2011

THE LAW OF THE LAND
Experience the law through the eyes of practitioners and not too familiar, strange stories of the law and where can't find the law.

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES: PAST AND PRESENT
Speakers from various backgrounds will discuss the early history of Australia, indigenous and their relevance in our society.

SEMESTER BEGIN: 16.2.2011
DURATION: 4 weeks, Tuesdays 6.30 pm - 8 pm
LOCATION: Recipe Cafe and Bar, 133 Queens Parade, Clifton Hill
FORMAT: 45 mins presentation, 45 mins open discussion

SEMESTER BEGIN: 17.2.2011
DURATION: 4 weeks, Thursdays 6.30 pm - 8.30 pm
LOCATION: Long Play, 210 St Georges Road, North Fitzroy 3008

WEEK 1: 16.2.2011 David Lucas Personal Life: You should pay for my life, which I never wanted anyway	WEEK 4: 16.3.2011 Vic Peoples The crucial role of the opposition: A verbal contract is not worth the paper it is written on	WEEK 2: 23.2.2011 Vic Peoples Are we sympathetic for the wealthy? Why can't I contact out of all laws? Why is family law different?	WEEK 5: 16.3.2011 Vic Peoples The obligation to obey the law: Does power only come out of the hand of the law?
WEEK 3: 23.2.2011 Vic Peoples Personal Consent: I got what I wanted but do I want what I got?	WEEK 6: 16.3.2011 Vic Peoples Social engineering through the Income Tax Act: The Income Tax Act as the greatest source of social reconstruction	WEEK 4: 24.2.2011 Vic Peoples The obligation to obey the law: Does power only come out of the hand of the law?	
WEEK 2: 23.2.2011 Vic Peoples Are we sympathetic for the wealthy? Why can't I contact out of all laws? Why is family law different?	WEEK 5: 16.3.2011 Vic Peoples The obligation to obey the law: Does power only come out of the hand of the law?	WEEK 3: 23.2.2011 Vic Peoples Personal Consent: I got what I wanted but do I want what I got?	

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FIRST SEMESTER 2011

FREE WINTER FILM COURSE:
An Introduction to the Politics of Representation and Aesthetics in Cinema

SEMESTER BEGIN: 16.06.2011
DURATION: Tuesdays 6.30 pm - 8.30 pm
LOCATION: Long Play, 210 St Georges Road, North Fitzroy 3008

WEEK 1: 14.06.2011 Mr. Tyson Matson, La Trobe University Images of War: Aesthetics, Simulation and Postmodernism	WEEK 4: 5.07.2011 Dr. Claire Hodges, University of Melbourne The Politics of Apocalyptic-Zombie Horror Films
WEEK 2: 21.06.2011 Dr. Gabriele Maruy Post-9/11 and Representations of Screen Violence	WEEK 5: 12.07.2011 Dr. Claire Hodges, University of Melbourne The Politics of Apocalyptic-Zombie Horror Films
WEEK 3: 28.06.2011 Ms. Shoshana Koffler, University of Toronto War and Politics in Media: Documentary Film	

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REFUGEE REALITIES: RISK, RIGHTS AND RESETTLEMENT

Speakers provide unique takes on issues facing refugees and the countries that host them, as well as posing important questions about current policy directions and frameworks.

SEMESTER BEGINS: 11.10.2011
DAY AND TIME: Tuesdays 8.30-9pm
LOCATION: Dexter Cafe and Bar, 123 Queens Pde, Clifton Hill
FORMAT: 45 minutes presentation, 45 minutes open discussion

WHAT IF ...?

Speakers explore radical ideas about how our world might be

SEMESTER BEGINS: 13.9.2011
DAY AND TIME: Thursdays 8.30-9pm
LOCATION: The Alderman (top floor), 131 Launceston Street, Brunswick East
FORMAT: 45 minutes presentation, 45 minutes open discussion

WEEK 1: 13.10.2011
Panel debate: What if education was free?
WEEK 2: 20.10.2011
Book Chapters (Victoria Fall): What if we did not differ?
WEEK 3: 27.10.2011
Michael Webster (Melbourne Uni): What if we were living about China?
WEEK 4: 3.11.2011
Jessica Whyte (Brisbane Uni): What if human rights are not like animals, but part of the process?
WEEK 5: 10.11.2011
Justin Chapman (Melbourne Uni): What if democracy was really democracy?
WEEK 6: 17.11.2011
Caroline O'Driscoll (La Trobe Uni): What if our worst experts are already corrupt?

WEEK 7: 24.11.2011
Janet Senack (Foundation House): Another arrival. What happens to refugees denied protection following an adverse ASIO security assessment?
WEEK 8: 1.12.2011
Sandy Gilford (La Trobe Uni): Camps, detention, and informal settlement. These desirable outcomes, by any name?
WEEK 9: 8.12.2011
Rikana George, Carolea Saperas-Gavalloni and Chris Mwanika (University of Melbourne): Reflections on the ongoing effect of refugee experiences after resettlement in Australia

WEEK 10: 15.12.2011
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ON LANGUAGE

Speakers explore the study of language from different perspectives, to highlight the centrality of language in the wide array of human endeavour. Courses explore different languages and their 21st century uses, how they vary and change, how they are used and used in different societies and cultures, and the links between language and literature, rhetoric, and philosophy.

SEMESTER BEGINS: 17.9.2011
DAY AND TIME: Tuesdays 8.30 - 9pm
LOCATION: Dexter Cafe and Bar, 123 Queens Pde, Clifton Hill
FORMAT: 45 mins presentation, 45 mins open discussion

WEEK 1: 17.9.2011
Debbie Larkin (Melbourne Uni): An iPad, a song recorder, a pair of ears and a conversation: measuring language variation and change in Victoria
WEEK 2: 24.9.2011
Caroline Brown (Melbourne Uni): Learning how to talk the talk: Second language acquisition and bilinguality
WEEK 3: 1.10.2011
Ann Swenson (Melbourne Uni): The life of signs in society
WEEK 4: 8.10.2011
Scotty Nordlinger (Melbourne Uni): Ancient rhetoric: An overview
WEEK 5: 15.10.2011
Rob McCrum (Victoria Uni): Australian's Indigenous languages
WEEK 6: 22.10.2011
Steve Cook (Melbourne Uni): Language, comedy and truth: Lucian (and Tapesius) against the ideology of management
WEEK 7: 29.10.2011
Scotty Nordlinger (Melbourne Uni): The First and Last Global Social Movement: The International Citizen Movement
WEEK 8: 5.11.2011
Michael Coates (La Trobe Uni): Taking to the Streets: AIDS Activism in Australia
WEEK 9: 12.11.2011
Scotty Nordlinger (Melbourne Uni): What the Refugee Right? Social Movements and Social Change
WEEK 10: 19.11.2011
Geoffrey Hirst (Melbourne Uni): What the Refugee Right? Social Movements and Social Change

SEMESTER BEGINS: 19.4.2012
DAY AND TIME: Thursdays 6.30 pm - 8 pm
LOCATION: The Alderman (top floor), 131 Launceston Street, Brunswick East
FORMAT: 45 mins presentation, 45 mins open discussion

WEEK 1: 19.4.2012
Geoffrey Hirst (Melbourne Uni): Social Movements and Social Change
WEEK 2: 26.4.2012
Michael Coates (La Trobe Uni): Taking to the Streets: AIDS Activism in Australia
WEEK 3: 3.5.2012
Michael Coates (La Trobe Uni): Taking to the Streets: AIDS Activism in Australia
WEEK 4: 10.5.2012
Scotty Nordlinger (Melbourne Uni): The First and Last Global Social Movement: The International Citizen Movement
WEEK 5: 17.5.2012
Scotty Nordlinger (Melbourne Uni): What the Refugee Right? Social Movements and Social Change

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CONTROVERSIES ON FILM

This course will address a range of issues to do with the theme of controversy in cinema: controversial films, filmmakers and film topics; controversial film theories; and controversies regarding film financing and production.

DAY AND TIME: Thursdays 6.20 pm - 8.30pm approx
LOCATION: Long Play, 315 St Georges Road, North Fitzroy 3066

Week 1: 16.2.2012
Yusuf Kamil, La Trobe University: The HolyGrail and the Mirror of Galileo: Cinema's Theatrical Storytelling. *Winter Meeting 5, The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005) DVD only

Week 2: 23.2.2012
Can Venezia, Monash University: The Great White North: Jack Smith's Family Creators Screening: *Jack Smith's Family Creators* (1981) DVD only


Week 3: 1.3.2012
Richard Walthenstaff, Australian Film Institute and Festival Director: Plenty of Reasons to Stop Worrying and Love Pornography: *Can Pornography Save Cinema?* Screening: *Richard Walthenstaff's The Last Days of Joe Blow* (2011)

Week 4: 8.3.2012
John Hughes, Australian Filmmaker: *Indelible Calling and Justice in Political Documentary* Screening: *John Hughes' Indelible Calling, Andy Nees & Anselmo* (2007) DVD only

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SPECIAL SEMINAR: on Porn

MEAGAN TYLER (Victoria University)

DATE: Wednesday 13 April
TIME: 6.30-8pm
PLACE: Dexter's cafe and bar, 123 Queens Pde Clifton Hill
FORMAT: 45 minutes presentation, 45 minutes open discussion

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LECTURERS

Lecturers need not be academics. They can be anyone with specific knowledge and experience of a topic, and an ability to share their knowledge with the wider community.

We have found that the 45/45 format works well to foster discussion, especially as your audience acclimatises to the free university style of learning, and it may be best to start with this format.

At the MFU, we have had lawyers speaking on legal issues, farmers speaking on urban agriculture, and refugees speaking on the refugee experience, as well as academics speaking on their area of research.

When contacting potential lecturers, be aware that people are busy and you may not be high on their priority list, especially as a fledgling initiative. It is often good to email an invitation to speak first, giving information about the project, the course, and the topic you'd like them to speak on. If you don't hear back, be bold! Email again. And then call them.

Make sure that your lecturers know what to expect from their session at the free university in terms of format, space, audience and learning environment.

Finally, beware of lecturers from traditional university systems who may be unwilling or unable to adapt to the less formal free university style of learning and discussion. In cases like this, the moderator might intervene and open up the discussion to the audience. Always try to pick speakers that you think will be engaging in the free university context. At times you'll find that the most interesting people on paper are not the most interesting speakers - try to do some research if you can. You will also have to consider which voices will be valuable to discussions at the free university. Such decisions should not be taken on ideological grounds, but it may mean that you might want to consider the educational value of some speakers.

Lecturers need not prepare a formal lecture for their session at the free university. They should present in a way they feel comfortable with, keeping in mind the open learning environment, and foster broad discussion, which may go beyond the specific points they've raised.

Seminars and lectures can be flexible in style, and lecturers should have the freedom to format the session to suit their style. Some lecturers will prefer the 45 minutes lecture and 45 minutes discussion format, while others will encourage more audience engagement, or use workshop-style approaches to teaching.

MODERATION

Moderators are an essential part of sessions. Good moderation is invisible, but is central to the success of sessions. Everyone will develop their own style of moderation, but there are a few things to keep in mind. Being the moderator is difficult, as you need to balance the need to let the discussion flow freely without letting it get out of hand. This means that in some cases you might have to step in and refocus the discussion. However, in most cases, the best moderation is silent.

Before you start your session, always ask your speakers if there's anything in particular they'd like you to include in their introduction. If you're using amplification, make sure that your speakers know how to use the microphone. If you're recording the session, make sure you ask the speaker's permission first.

At the beginning of each session, the moderator should briefly introduce the speaker/s, and explain the format and learning environment of your free university to the audience. Be sure to encourage your audience to engage openly in the discussion and to bring their own ideas, experiences and perspectives to the table. It doesn't have to be a Question & Answer session – free universities offer the potential for a much deeper and more engaged discussion, in which the audience bring as many ideas and knowledge to the table as the lecturer does. People find this a rewarding way to learn.

Body language is important to set the right dynamic in sessions. When moderating a panel, make sure you sit at the end of the line of speakers, so that you never turn your back on them in the discussion. With one

speaker, angle your chair towards them, not away. Smile, and be welcoming in your introduction.

When moderating a discussion, always be polite, but firm, with rude audience members, speakers, everyone. If you want to interject but aren't sure how, it can be less abrupt if you signal first with body language or sounds of agreement, which can open a space for you to say something without cutting off the speaker.

At the end of a session, give any details on upcoming events. Thank the audience for coming, and then ask you to join them in thanking the speakers/panel.

At the MFU we have found that audiences generally respond positively to a light-handed moderation style. While the discussions at many sessions are vibrant – and can get heated at times – very few sessions have descended into chaos. That the MFU is an open and free space for learning has been key to maintaining this dynamic, and differentiates us from other politically oriented spaces. In our introduction to sessions we always emphasise what the MFU is about, and that the discussion space be respectful and based on the recognition that everyone is equally valuable as a participant.

MARKETING, MEDIA AND OUTREACH

There are a variety of ways to engage with your audience and the community at large. To appeal to a wide audience it is important to make use of a range of media, such as local radio, community papers, community notice-boards, and other media outlets. Building a website and using social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, will also be key tools in your outreach strategy.

At the MFU, our marketing was transformed after we appointed a volunteer media coordinator. Our efforts had previously been haphazard and lacked focus. With the help of a professional PR person we were able to get radio gigs, newspaper articles and other media placements that advertised the MFU and our courses within the community, across the city and beyond.

Target your media! Think about who your target audience is, and which media outlets are most likely to reach them. Don't waste time and effort on media that is unlikely to have an impact – focus on the things that will.

National media is useful to build a reputation and name for your free university, but may take a long time and a lot of effort to get into. Local media is

better for promoting your courses and building an audience base within your community.

Create a website. This is the public's interface with your organization. Make it look good so that you have credibility, but also make it easy to use for you and your community. This is a task worth outsourcing to a web-master with the skills necessary to build and maintain websites. The maintenance of an online presence will mean you are able to share the knowledge and discussions being generated within your free university more broadly.



SNAPSHOT:
May Maloney
(Lecturer, course coordinator, participant)

Melbourne Free University is a democratic space that acknowledges the varied and important experiences and knowledge of everyone. It is inclusive, often radical, informative and empowering. Best of all, it is free of charge and allows academic and social nourishment beyond the school halls, beyond the confines of your lounge room and beyond the strict orthodox barriers that (so often) limit our pursuit of a deeper understanding.

Think about what you'd like to put on your website. Ours has our principles, recordings, information about us, upcoming courses and course archives, and contact details. Have a look at ours for ideas: melbournefreeuniversity.org

Mailing lists are a free and great way to keep in contact with your community. Facebook and Twitter also provide good tools to connect with your audience and send updates on courses and seminars.

Aim to send out course information about 2 weeks before courses start. This requires forward planning and may not always be possible. You may be waiting on final confirmation from speakers or venues before you can advertise courses. But it's good to aim for a longer lead-time so that you can advertise widely before courses begin.

We send weekly emails to our subscriber list with details of what's on that week, and we update our Facebook and Twitter to send reminders on the days of sessions.

Facebook: [MelbourneFreeUni](https://www.facebook.com/MelbourneFreeUni)

Twitter: [@MelbFreeUni](https://twitter.com/MelbFreeUni)

You may want to think about whether you ask people to RSVP for your sessions. While this can be useful in anticipating audience numbers, it does establish a formalised dynamic that runs contrary to the principle of open accessibility. People should feel able to come to any free university session whenever they feel like it, regardless of prior commitment.

At the MFU, we decided not to ask for RSVPs. While this means that we never know how many people will turn up, it has meant that people have felt free to drop in when it suited them. On occasion this can be problematic; for instance, our first philosophy session was mobbed and we had to turn people away. For subsequent sessions we set up a PA and broadcast the talk throughout the café allowing more people to take part.

Think about communities that are not attending your free university. How can you break some of the barriers that are keeping them away? An outreach coordinator may be helpful here to assist you in targeting these communities. Don't take all this on at once, give yourself and your team time to develop. This may be something to think about once your free university is more established.

Think about people who cannot attend your lectures. How can you include them in the free university experience? Recording or publishing lectures is a good way to share the knowledge being generated at your free university.

To broaden the accessibility of the MFU's courses and seminars, we record all of our lectures (if our speakers are comfortable with that, of course!) and make them available on our website here [[link](#)]. Our recordings are freely available online, and can be re-used by other organisations. For instance, a small rural free university in Australia streams our lectures as the basis for their discussions. The MFU is not a registered entity, which means that while we don't have copyright over our recordings, we trust that people credit them appropriately and don't misuse them, and we mention this on our website.

We also encourage our lecturers to publish excerpts of their lectures in local and national news media.

SNAPSHOT: **Alexandra Stewart** *(Participant)*

Attending the Melbourne Free University has changed my outlook on life and learning. Not only has it given me the opportunity to access information on a wide range of subjects offered by such varied speakers (many of whom I would not otherwise be able to exchange with), but in removing the division between the 'teacher' and the 'learner', it allows everyone to feel valued and heard.

Before the MFU, I had never been comfortable expressing my opinions in groups. The provision of a supportive and open discussion in a community setting has given me the confidence to test my ideas on others, but has also taken the fear and doubt out of asking questions, as everyone comes to the sessions with the same openness of mind. Now, I can apply the lessons I have learnt from the MFU to enhance the way I learn and exchange with others in other environments.



The question of whether you need or want to get funding for your free university project is one you will have to decide based on your own principles and motivations.

By definition, free universities offer the opportunity to access learning opportunities for free, which means that they do not generate income from their students. This disengagement from commercial interests is one of the key characteristics that differentiates free universities from the formal tertiary education sector.



SNAPSHOT:
Zlatko Muhvic
(Participant)

In comparison to the conventional educational landscape MFU not only encourages dialogue, argument, critique, disagreement and diversity of opinion, but also provides a secure intellectual environment where authority is not based on a legitimate or expert power but on the law of situation. It is an environment where knowledge is not deposited but shared and created among equals, who gather for the sake of enquiry. Each individual their own learning objectives.

FUNDING AT THE MFU

At the MFU, we decided that our free university was based on the principle that the creation of a space for the open sharing of knowledge and education could happen outside a capitalist economic framework, and so we operate on the principle of ‘no money in, no money out.’ All our resources are donated to us – we don’t pay for the spaces we use, we have volunteers working on our website, designing our posters, coordinating our admin and publicity, and our speakers and coordinators all volunteer their time to the MFU. When specific resources are required, such as the payment of website costs, they are donated to us ‘in kind,’ meaning that money is not funnelled through us, but paid directly to cover relevant costs. The MFU has been running this way, without any formal funding, since its inception in 2010.

However, free universities may require funding for some things, such as venue hire, publicity, website costs, printing, insurance, recording equipment and so on. The question is whether you can access such resources for free, or whether you do actually need to find some money to cover their costs. There are many ways to avoid having your free university pay for these things. Seek out venues that offer their space for free, and where you aren’t expected to pay any liability insurance. Look for philanthropic support for certain costs. Encourage ‘in kind’ donations as much as possible. This means, for instance, that someone volunteers to pay for the website costs, someone provides pro bono legal or marketing advice, or someone uses their personal or business printer for your posters and flyers. When printing posters, consider the likely impact of hard copy posters over an online campaign. Avoiding printing excessive posters will reduce your costs and environmental footprint.

It is important to emphasise the free university ethic to your speakers. This means that they won’t be paid for their lecture and transport or other costs. They too are donating their time and expertise.

When we started the MFU, we assumed that we should offer to buy speakers dinner or drinks in return for their participation. We quickly realised that not only would this be an unnecessary expense for our free university, but that speakers didn’t expect it, and were more than happy to volunteer their time and resources for the project. In the past two years, only one person refused to participate on account of there being no payment!



We decided that the MFU would not become a formalised institution. While it would have given us some benefits, such as protecting our name, we felt that it would compromise our autonomy and the free and open space we wanted to create. This hasn't been an impediment to our free university in the long run.



SNAPSHOT:
Matt Burke
(Participant)

As someone who has little interest in doing another degree, the Melbourne Free University has given me the opportunity to learn about a variety of interesting topics in a relaxed atmosphere. Though each "semester" has a theme, it's great to see a variety of speakers present their field of study.

This has not only given us diversity in the ideas presented but also constant change and a fresh approach from each speaker. The MFU provides the chance for us to not only ask the presenter questions but also to take an active part in the discussion.

It's not often that you find something that encourages learning for the sake of learning, and it's been a real mind-opening experience for me. It's also handy to be part of a learning experience where it's okay if you can't make it all the time, thus really giving you the freedom of learning when and how you want to.

Applying for grants may be one option for generating funding. You will need to consider how accepting money from funding bodies affects the autonomy of your project. Applying for grants takes a surprising amount of time and energy, and can divert your attention from the core activities of running your free university. You will also need to consider the additional demands that receiving grants involves, such as financial and other reporting.

Further, if you do decide to apply for external funding, you will often be required to formalise your institution by officially registering it. This often involves establishing a formal board and hierarchy, which may be in tension with the principles of open and democratic decision making. You may also be required to register a business name, submit tax returns and so on, which again increases your administrative workload significantly. Therefore, if you are considering using an economic model different to the 'no money in, no money out' one, it might be worth appointing a fundraising coordinator and/or accounts manager.

WHAT NOT TO FORGET

- Build on your strengths: if you have a music background, start with a course on music and build it up from there. Don't reinvent the wheel.
- Have fun in the process, and learn.
- Try to get a team together to share the burden as well as the adventure.
- Remember, you will make mistakes; the key is to learn from them.
- You're creating a space for learning, not an edifice of esteem.
- Make people feel welcome. Everyone should have a voice and say, whether or not you agree with them. Moderation of the talks and discussion is important here. Be open, but also make sure you allow a wide variety of voices to come to the fore.
- Inclusiveness is key. Make sure that your speakers come from a range of backgrounds. Gender equity is also important to give you credibility.
- Some topics and some speakers are bigger draw cards than others. Use them to increase your audience and appeal, but don't forget why you are doing this – to open a space for discussion. Make sure that speakers and the audience know this.

ABOUT US:

Gerhard, Aurelien and Jasmine founded the MFU in 2010, and have been convening the free university since.

Gerhard Hoffstaedter was a researcher at La Trobe University and is now a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Queensland. He blogs at anthropolitics.wordpress.com.

Aurelien Mondon has recently completed a Doctorate in Politics at La Trobe University. His doctoral research focused on the impact of populism and racism on parliamentary democracies and elections. Some of his writing can be found on his blog briefandfalseadvertising.net.

Jasmine-Kim Westendorf is a PhD candidate in international relations at La Trobe University, researching peace processes in civil wars. She writes on peace, security, development, and feminism.



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Here's to free education!



