

TEACHING IN AUSTRALIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: POSSIBLE EFFECTS  
OF  
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Gabrielle Baldwin

Monash University

As indicated in the title, this paper will be largely speculative in nature. It must be, as the policies discussed are not fully implemented or, in at least one case (the use of performance indicators) not in place at all. It may be quite foolhardy to indulge in a spot of crystal ball gazing about the future direction of tertiary education in this country, but I believe that the attempt must be made, or we shall find ourselves overwhelmed by the change which seems to be inevitable and likely to be both rapid and far-reaching.

Many academics seem already to be suffering from the symptoms of future shock, though as yet the activities in which they engage may not be remarkably different in form from those in which they engaged as students, except that the numbers squeezing into tutorial rooms designed for ten may now be closer to 20. The principal source of the shock at the moment seems to be the dramatic shift in the discourse of tertiary education, in the ways in which the enterprise is constructed in the language of politicians, administrators and even the fifth column in our midst. Those of us who grew up

with concepts of 'the pursuit of truth' or 'the development of the individual', who were taught that the Latin word 'educare' means 'to lead forth' and that 'education' therefore is something quite different from training may be amazed by the speed with which the discourse has shifted to statements about education serving the economic and social needs of the society, issuing from a government department whose recently-acquired title of 'Employment, Education and Training' represents a throwing-down of a gauntlet to traditionalists.

There is a major study waiting to be written about the history of the discourse of education in this country, one which, in its deconstruction of the terms of debate at different periods, might also reveal to us how the lofty ideals of truth and personal fulfillment cloaked a good deal of elitism and pretension, and the assumption of being above accountability to the people whose taxes were supporting the system. That, however, is not the subject of this paper, though an awareness of the rhetorical battle being fought on the subject of tertiary education forms the context for my remarks. Too often the debate stays at the level of ideological slogans, with the two sides fighting for the moral high ground, trading the rallying-cries of 'excellence' and 'equity', meeting the charge of 'attack on academic freedom' with the counter-cry of 'accountability to the society'. Such debates are fascinating to analyse, but they tend to be quite repetitious, to be short on detail and to ignore the fact that

what we are witnessing in Australia is part of a widespread trend throughout the industrialised world. To blame it all on Dawkins is remarkably short-sighted. Certainly one can argue about the Minister's particular proposals; it may be that the responses to the pressures on the tertiary education system

which are offered in this country are based on faulty analysis, but it is undeniable that the pressures are general in industrialised societies. They will not go away and the status quo cannot be maintained in the face of them.

This country is caught up in a process in which education is shifting to a central position in the economic life of developed countries; because of this, tertiary education must move from an elite system to a mass system and must do it very quickly. I think what is often forgotten is just how far and rapidly Australia has already moved in this direction. The policy statement on higher education, known as the White Paper (Dawkins, 1988:6) quotes the following figures: in 1948, there were 50,000 students in higher education in this country; by 1988, there were 400,000. (In 1989, that figure rose to 441,000). School retention rates have soared and continue to move upwards. Despite a growth of 67,000 higher education places between 1983 and 1988, the level of unmet demand has remained relatively high. In the White Paper, the stated objective is to increase school retention rates to year 12 to 65% by the early 1990s, and to continue to expand the higher education system to meet the increased demand. The current

plan is to provide a further 70,000 places in the five-year period between 1988 and 1993.

A crucial question is to what extent the public is prepared to finance that expansion and on what terms. I would stress that this question is not unique to Australia but is being debated heatedly in a number of countries. Even if one sets aside the question of funding, it remains true that the system cannot continue as it did when the children of the wealthy and the brightest of the deserving poor from the handful of state high schools went up to get their degrees from the six old universities. The pressures for change will not disappear and I believe that the people teaching in tertiary institutions should be exploring the implications of federal government policies for teaching, and developing strategies to either 'take advantage of the opportunities for change' or 'make the best of a bad thing', depending on one's point of view.

Having attempted to de-politicize this analysis, I will now outline briefly the main policies issuing from the federal government which seem likely to affect tertiary teaching and then offer some views on what the effects might be. In relation to teaching, the main elements of the Dawkins program are as follows:

- \* the creation of a Unified National System, involving the abolition of the binary divide and the amalgamation of institutions (most commonly, the amalgamation of colleges with universities);
- \* the direction of institutions as to 'priority areas'

for teaching; this year, these are the areas of computer science, engineering, accounting, other business and commerce, teacher education (especially in maths, science and foreign languages), Asian studies and environmental studies;

- \* the requirement that institutions develop equity plans as part of their profiles, to offer increased access and subsequently support to certain categories of students (people from

socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women in non-traditional courses and postgraduate study, people with disabilities, people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, people from rural and isolated areas);

- \* the expansion and rationalisation of distance education;
- \* the requirement, under the Australian Universities Academic Staff (Conditions of Employment) Award (1988), that institutions develop systems of staff appraisal for academic staff;
- \* the development of performance indicators for tertiary institutions.

To what extent have these policies been implemented? The

most advanced is probably the process of amalgamation of institutions, although in recent months some of the proposed marriages have come unstuck, particularly in Victoria, taking the negotiations back to square one. However, even in those institutions where amalgamation has gone fairly smoothly, as in the merge of Monash with Chisholm Institute, most of the work involved in integrating the day-to-day teaching activities of the two institutions still remains to be done. The designation of priority areas has not as yet had a major effect on the teaching profiles of institutions. The scheme operates only in relation to the funding of extra places; there has been no attempt to pressure institutions to cut back on existing enrolments in non-priority areas. Some critics believe that can only be a matter of time. The equity plan, 'A Fair Chance for All' was introduced only in May of this year; institutions were required to incorporate equity measures in their profiles, but these proposals are still at a very preliminary stage. Similarly, the reorganisation of distance education through the Distance Education Centres is just getting under way.

The Academic Staff Award was finalised in October 1988, but little seems to have been done to implement the provisions on staff appraisal. Some institutions are still negotiating with their local Staff Associations about local procedures. Others have interpreted the Award as requiring only a 'trip-wire' implementation: the system is only 'tripped' if a staff member is judged to be unsatisfactory. This means that in these institutions there will be no regular staff

appraisal. Indications are that very few institutions in the Unified National System have established a mechanism for regular staff appraisal.

The Performance Indicators scheme seems to have stalled or at least slowed down considerably. In late 1988, a joint Working Party of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) and the Australian Committee of Directors and Principals (ACDP) proposed a set of performance indicators for tertiary institutions, which were accepted by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) as the basis for a trial involving 14 institutions in 1989. Returns from participating institutions were submitted by the end of 1989 but the report of the research committee has not been finalised. The latest estimate is that it will appear in March of 1991. Initially, in the White Paper, the Minister

stated an unequivocal intention to use performance indicators in decisions about the allocation of funds. However, members of the committee have stated recently that it is likely that the committee will recommend that the indicators should not be tied to funding, but should be used to encourage a climate of self-evaluation and to provide a mechanism to facilitate that process. Certainly, there are no output measures in the recently-announced Relative Funding Model. In this paper, I will consider only the indicators proposed for Teaching and Curriculum. These include measures of the perceived quality

and relevance of teaching and curriculum', as evaluated by students at the end of their course, completion rates and times for undergraduates and postgraduates, and the employability of graduates.

I will start my discussion of the possible effects of the policies I have outlined with three items picked up in the course of my reading. The first is from Britain, where measures similar to some of those described have been in place for several years. An article in The Times Higher Education Supplement of 26 October 1990 reports a concern about the possible effect of a performance indicator of doctoral completion rates:

Anecdotal evidence that the blacklisting of social science departments with low doctoral completion rates is having an impact on the rules used to assess theses is to be tested by leading university sociologists. . . . Professor Urry pointed to suggestions that the Economic and Social Research Council academic sanctions policy, introduced in 1985, which from this year will require recognised departments to have a 50 per cent doctoral submission rate within four years of registration, has led some institutions to alter their requirements. "The two areas where there appear to have been changes are in the length of the thesis and the institutional definition of the originality requirement".



If the 'anecdotal evidence' is true, this case represents the realization of the fears of critics who claim that to assess and fund institutions on completion rates and times is merely to encourage the lowering of standards. So far in Australia, however, this measure has been treated quite differently. Ahead of the Performance Indicators scheme per se, data on completion rates and times of postgraduate students have already been collected, analysed and presented as a cause for considerable concern. Individual institutions have been asked by DEET to examine their own records in this area and to develop strategies for improving the situation. The result has been a valuable process of self-evaluation, leading, in a number of institutions, to improved guidelines on supervision, training for supervisors and better support systems for postgraduate students. This example serves to illustrate the potential for quite different kinds of outcomes which lies in some of these measures, depending on the way in which they are handled.

The second item is a document presented recently to the Monash University Engineering Faculty Board, putting the case

for a change of name, from the Department of Civil Engineering to the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. One of the reasons given for the change was: 'The name change is likely to attract students who would otherwise look elsewhere. In particular more women are likely to pursue the course.'

This is a faculty goal'. It is also, of course, a federal government goal, one of the specific targets of the equity plan. The department in question argued that the proposed name merely reflected what they in fact taught. However, this move can be seen as symbolic of the changes in approach to the teaching of Engineering that may result from attempts to attract more women into the discipline and the effects of their presence there. In pursuit of the same goal, Monash has recently introduced a combined Arts/Engineering degree, which is proving to be quite attractive to women. What might be the effects of the presence in Engineering faculties of large groups of female students who are also studying Humanities? It could conceivably change the curriculum and teaching methods significantly.

The third item is also from Monash Faculty Board minutes, this time from the Science Faculty. In the Dean's statement about proposed developments in the Faculty, issued in September 1990, the following statement is made under the heading of 'Learning Strategies':

Special attention is already paid to progress of first-year students and Resource Centres in Chemistry and Physics are used to supplement the tutorial system. Seed funding has been provided for similar development in Mathematics and will be extended to Biology. The Faculty will make an appointment to co-ordinate the work of these Centres or perhaps even to combine them in a

faculty centre. Meanwhile the Faculty is funding a computer-aided and computer-assisted learning program, and exploring the use of Distance Education techniques.

Underlying this statement is an assumption that traditional teaching techniques will have to be, if not replaced, then supplemented by procedures which are less demanding of staff time and which shift the emphasis on to student-directed learning. The link between computer-aided learning and distance education is interesting, as it reflects one of the strategies outlined in the White Paper: the extension of distance education techniques and packages to the teaching of internal students, including 'the use of advanced technologies'. Some distance education enthusiasts are arguing that it will be through this mode that the full potential of computer-aided learning will be realized, given that, so far, it seems to have been very little used in on-campus teaching in our tertiary institutions. Against the exciting possibilities envisaged by these enthusiasts must be set the fears of others that distance education techniques and computer-aided learning will be used indiscriminately as a 'quick-fix' solution to funding constraints in areas where there is no satisfactory substitute for face-to-face teaching.

I offer these items as straws in the wind, indicators of future developments, exciting or worrying, to which we should

attend. One can speculate about the possible effects of many of the detailed provisions of the policies under consideration, but limitations of time and space dictate that I move into analysis of a broader kind. The rest of this paper will canvass the possible benefits for teaching which might flow from the package of policies and against this set the negative scenario of how teaching could be adversely affected.

The most obvious potential benefit in the package as outlined is that the activity of teaching may be valued and rewarded in the tertiary education system, as it has not been valued and rewarded in the past. This could be achieved through the attempt in the Performance Indicators scheme to develop measures of teaching quality and the related attempt to improve the performance of individual staff members through staff appraisal schemes. If ways can be found of assessing teaching performance, ways that are acceptable to the academic community, and these assessments are given an important place in the selection and promotion procedures of institutions, this could have a dramatic effect on the quality of tertiary teaching.

An increased emphasis on teaching performance could in turn lead to improved training of teachers. The Academic Staff Award contains a number of clauses relating to staff development; institutions are required to establish a staff development programme which should offer academic staff members the opportunity to develop their skills and effectiveness, particularly in the teaching area. True, the

Award does have the clause 'where funds are available' inserted in this requirement and critics argue that the phrase reduces the prescriptions to a set of pious hopes. However, it does seem to have given a new impetus to academic staff development programs in a number of institutions and the newly created Staff Development Fund has started distributing money for special programs, some of which at least are designed to improve the quality of teaching.

This trend could be strengthened by other elements of the DEET policy package. If the equity program is successful in bringing into our tertiary institutions many students from non-traditional backgrounds, it is likely that these students will require more structured and concentrated teaching than the more privileged students who have occupied tertiary places in the past. It can be argued that the universities in particular have been able to get away with paying scant attention to pedagogical procedures because they have been dealing with high-performing students who can learn despite the teaching if necessary. This is often given as an explanation for the difference in teaching hours between universities and colleges, that is, that college students require more 'teaching'. If non-traditional students will require more teaching time, they may also require more disciplined organization of the learning process, greater clarification of objectives, more structured development of courses, etc., all of which could greatly improve the quality of teaching for all students.

In attempts to improve the quality of tertiary teaching, the amalgamations of universities with colleges could prove to be very useful, as college academics claim, with good reason, to be more experienced in the processes of course design, the

articulation of objectives, the preparing of course materials, the matching of assessment with objectives, etc. One important factor here is that, in the past, the colleges have had to prepare course proposals for accreditation and re-accreditation. These documents are usually very detailed and highly structured and they are subjected to close and critical scrutiny. It is an experience that few university academics have had; in many cases, a proposal for a new subject in a university has been little more than a book list. It is true that some college academics state that the process of preparing detailed course proposals for accreditation is a waste of time and that the documents often bear little relation to what is actually taught. Even so, there may be many benefits in the experience of thinking through a detailed course proposal, from which the universities could gain a good deal.

Along the same lines, there could be benefits flowing to on-campus education from the development of distance education procedures. I have already made reference to the possibility that distance education may provide the impetus for the full development of computer-aided learning. Apart from this, some academics have already found that the process of writing up

their courses in the form of distance education modules has helped considerably in clarifying their aims and organising their material. To construct a module forces one to plan ahead, to see the course as a whole, rather than teaching week-by-week, as is sometimes the case on-campus.

If the attempts to change the profile of the student body are successful, the effects on curriculum could be radical and far-reaching. There could be considerable pressure on

teachers to incorporate more of the experience of the broader Australian society into their course materials. This has already happened in relation to women's experiences, with many courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and to some extent in Law and the Health Professions, reflecting those experiences in ways that would have been inconceivable even 20 years ago. It is surely no accident that those 20 years have seen a remarkable increase in female participation in tertiary education, to the point where women are now in the majority at undergraduate level. Some feminists claim that the presence of women in large numbers will significantly affect teaching procedures and approaches as well as course materials, but that has not yet been demonstrated. What might be the effect on curriculum of a significant shift in the social class mix of tertiary students? In the humanities, perhaps an acceleration of the process already under way of incorporating many elements of so-called 'popular culture' into courses of study.

Finally, the designation of 'priority areas' for expansion raises some interesting possibilities. Although

only operating on the margins so far, this policy is part of a broader attempt by the government to push/encourage tertiary institutions in the direction of 'greater relevance'. As a graduate of one of the least 'relevant' of disciplines, English literature, this trend makes me particularly uneasy, but at this point in the paper, let me put the case for this as a potentially beneficial move. An awareness on the part of staff and students of teaching and learning in areas of importance to the economy and the future development of the

society could sharpen motivation and increase enthusiasm for the task. A sense of working at the cutting edge of a rapidly developing discipline can be an exciting experience, conducive to commitment and innovation. Certainly I have observed this among some of the teachers and students in the area of Asian Studies, where the sense of mission is very strong at the moment.

So much for the scenario of exciting opportunity. Let me now construct the balancing scenario of decline and destruction, the end of civilization as we know it. Any regular reader of the Higher Education section in The Australian, particularly the comment and letters pages, will already be very familiar with some elements of this scenario.

In terms of teaching, the great danger in the new emphasis on measurement of performance is that teaching is difficult to measure, whereas research is comparatively easy. If indicators of research output are developed and accepted



(as seems likely, since some such indicators already operate in a number of areas), while the attempt to develop reliable teaching indicators is given up, then the activity of teaching is likely to be devalued even further in our tertiary institutions. If departments are judged entirely in terms of publications, research grants, consultancies, etc., then inevitably individual staff members will be urged to contribute in these areas, at the expense of their teaching, and this will be the focus of staff appraisal procedures.

If inadequate measures are established, this too could be very destructive. In the Performance Indicators trial, the views of final year students about the teaching they had received were sought, and they were asked to respond to a number of items in relation to their experience of the course as a whole or their major discipline, in faculties where there is choice. The idea was to establish a measure of a faculty or department ethos in relation to teaching, rather than attempting to measure directly how much learning had gone on. Those who conducted the trial claim that the results are promising, that the questionnaire did produce results which discriminated meaningfully between different departments. Apparently the research group will propose a further national trial through the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) Survey. However, a number of academics are still sceptical, including some who work in the area, particularly on the question of whether students can make meaningful judgments about a whole course. I will not comment on the substance of

this debate, since I have not seen the results, but I note the fear of many that such an instrument would not be very useful and would not gain general acceptance by the academic community.

A further concern often expressed is that, if a measure of teaching performance based on student evaluations is established, then teachers will simply teach to that measure, aiming for popularity rather than rigour. Again, this is not the time to embark on that thorny issue. My own position is that I do not share this concern, since my teaching experience in tertiary institutions and my reading of the research literature convinces me that students are essentially interested in learning and are not easily seduced by vacuous entertainment (though entertainment can aid learning considerably). If we were to fall back on the more

straightforward and 'objective' measures of teaching such as pass rates, the dangers here are obvious, particularly if these indicators are directly tied to funding. The temptation would be simply to change the pass rates without addressing any problems in the teaching and learning.

In Britain, the development of indicators of teaching quality has been given up as too difficult, but some research indicators are firmly in place and used to rank institutions regularly and publicly. Apparently those involved in the development of performance indicators in this country were determined not to let that happen here; at least one of the

reasons was that the colleges would not allow it to happen, since a system of indicators biased towards research and not covering teaching would devalue their traditional role. However, since many of the colleges are now being absorbed into universities and others are now gaining university status, perhaps the voice of the former college sector will disappear from the debate.

This leads to another potentially detrimental trend in the changing tertiary education scene. If the universities are dominant in amalgamations, as seems quite likely, and university values are established as the norm, then the potential enrichment of the new institutions flowing from the colleges' traditional teaching role could be blocked before it begins. There is disturbing anecdotal evidence that this may indeed be happening, as some college academics are being subjected to intense pressure to enrol for research degrees and to produce publications. One of the most disappointing aspects of the debates about amalgamations is the use by university academics of the PhD as a very crude measure of excellence, as in statements like: 'In the whole of x college, there are only y PhDs'. Many observers understandably fear that, in the scramble to establish credibility, teaching will suffer, not just in terms of the time devoted to it, but also in terms of catering for student needs; the diversity of the binary system, which was able to accommodate a range of student abilities and aspirations, may be lost. The further, very immediate danger in amalgamations is that, as claimed by a member of the panel which reviewed science and maths

education, institutions may simply be paralysed by the difficulty of actually merging two complete sets of very different course offerings.

In relation to the equity program, the obvious negative possibility is that, without additional funds for bridging courses, support systems and intensive teaching, students from groups which have not traditionally participated in tertiary institutions may not be able to cope, causing considerable suffering for them and stress and frustration for their teachers. A recent report in The Times Higher Education Supplement (November 16, 1990) suggests that this has happened in Britain. The article states: 'Higher education is failing to cope with rising numbers of vocationally qualified students who do much worse than A level entrants and drop out in large numbers, according to a report to be published in the new year.' Some would claim that, over time, the further result could be a lowering of standards, since there may be considerable political pressure not to fail these students in large numbers.

The attempt to force tertiary education into paths

considered more relevant to the society and more responsive to its economic and social needs could lead to the devaluing of both humanities and the pure sciences, and to poor morale in these areas among teachers and students. It could also mean that academics find themselves facing classes of people motivated by economic, rather than intellectual

considerations, students who have taken their cues from the public discourse of politicians and bureaucrats. In fact, some academics report that this has already happened, particularly in areas like economics and law, where many students express impatience with any attempts to raise interesting intellectual issues, seeing these as a distraction from the business of qualifying themselves to enter the workforce. They testify to a dramatic difference in students' attitudes from those of ten or 20 years ago. A further possibility relating to priority areas is that rapid expansion will result in the employment of inexperienced and inadequately qualified staff, with obvious deleterious effects on the quality of teaching. Some claim that this has already happened in some areas of Accounting, for instance.

As already mentioned, some academics see the promotion of distance education techniques and computer-aided learning as an evasion of the problems of declining staff-student ratios, overcrowded facilities and overworked staff, a 'quick-fix' solution to a problem which can only be properly remedied by the funding of education at previous levels. To them, there is no adequate substitute for face-to-face teaching and so the introduction of other procedures can only mean second-rate education. Finally, there is a clear danger that the whole move towards greater accountability will result in so much extra administration and paper-work that academics will have little time left for teaching.

There are more implications one could trace from the

elements of the Dawkins program, but I will stop there. This paper is presented in the hope of stimulating more of such speculation and the belief that thinking through the possible implications is a necessary basis for the attempt to influence the direction of change. Which scenario will prevail? I'm afraid my crystal ball doesn't show that. A number of my colleagues are convinced that the only possible direction from here is downhill, given the inescapable and possibly all-important fact that the funding of tertiary education in this country has declined in per capita terms for every one of the last fifteen years. I'm rather more inclined to think that the reality will be a messy mixture of advances and declines, of good patches and bad, as human enterprises usually are.

#### REFERENCES

The Australian Universities Academic Staff (Conditions of Employment) Award (1988), Canberra, AGPS.

Dawkins, J.S. (1988), Higher Education: a policy statement, Canberra, AGPS.