

HRD Perspectives of Australia on education planning with special reference to universities

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The evaluation of universities and its effects
on the financing of higher education

HUMAN BEING AND CULTURAL VALUES

The casual reference to acronyms can have its dangers. The use of HRD as shorthand could easily make us forget that development of human resources differs fundamentally from developing, say, mineral resources - which Australia has aplenty. Minerals are necessary for material existence but, as "things", they are devoid of a cultural meaning on their own, and acquire significance only when used at our human discretion. Not so humans themselves. Any attempt to manipulate people politically, economically or educationally, in a way that leaves out cultural values and individual consciousness, is doomed to failure. In the educational planning of human resources we are dealing with the world of meaning - with meanings which individuals hold of themselves and of their world as members of a particular social/cultural group. Social data is always somebody's data, since it belongs to those members of society who hold a certain perception of themselves and their wants (Znaniecki, 1968).

The world of culture enters all aspects of our human activities, even when it concerns development of mineral resources. As an example we can take the recent and long delayed decision of the Australian Prime Minister (Bob Hawke), prohibiting the mining of precious metals in the Coronation Hill area of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. Although gold, platinum and palladium are said to exist there in substantial quantities and mining groups have been anxious to dig them out, the Prime Minister has upheld the wishes of the Australian Aborigines who regard the hill as a sacred site. According to the cultural values of the original inhabitants of the country, disturbing the hill would desecrate the place of an ancestral being called Bulla, with calamitous consequences for the whole country. This example demonstrates the impossibility of leaving the cultural aspect out of any planning that impinges upon human needs and wants - whether material or spiritual.

In bowing to such beliefs, Mr. Hawke no doubt also had in mind the cultural values of those of his electorate who may not share this belief in the importance of the supernatural, but who wish to preserve the environment of the national park. In this case, spiritual and ecological concerns have outweighed the pressure of the mining companies, as well as the fear of deterring possible foreign investment. Mr. Hawke (1991) has publicly acknowledged the way he was swayed by his consideration for the cultural

values of a minority group by declaring that "a Christian society should not be contemptuous of the beliefs of the Aborigines". In responding to the pressures of the Aboriginal and ecological communities, the Prime Minister has earned for himself the label of a "neo-pagan" from a mining director who claimed that Hawke's decision would "undermine the moral basis of our legitimacy as a nation" (G. Hughes, 1991, p. 3).

Although such an outcome in a debate on the use of the nation's resources may strike one as rather novel in the post-industrialized "Western" world - it was the norm, rather than the exception, in ancient civilizations, as well as in many societies in Asia, where the environment was protected by religious beliefs which declared certain objects (be they trees, brooks or mountains) as beyond the grasping hand of human desirous of economic gain (White, 1968).

Traditionally, such cultural values have been transmitted orally among Australian Aborigines. In contrast, in Western style "mainstream" Australian society, their transmission has been largely through an educational system which consciously or unconsciously passed on a host of other, often contrary, cultural assumptions and principles. It is when the cultural values of a group are disregarded, and when educational planners relegate human beings to the status of things to be manipulated at will, that trouble begins. Often such policies have had disastrous consequences for the society concerned.

Examples of such disasters are readily available, as in the case of Stalin's five-year plans, and his drive to collectivise agriculture and to sacrifice light industry, geared towards consumption, on the altar of building heavy industries. His policies not only led to catastrophic levels of pollution, but resulted in famines and, ultimately, in the dismal economic failure of the whole society. The Soviet people sacrificed so much in the forlorn hope of future gains, promised by doctrinaire ideologues who were myopic in imposing their theoretical beliefs that ignored the individual consciousness and the culture of the people concerned.

The same mistakes, although fortunately with less disastrous consequences, were repeated in Central and Eastern Europe following World War II. Even during the mid 1970s, the doyen of Polish sociologists, Professor Jan Szczepanski (1978), attempted to re-model the country's educational system by aiming to produce a "communist man", or a Polish version of Homo sovieticus. Although he himself was never a Party member or a blind ideologue, he believed in the invincibility and indestructibility of

the authoritarian system that was established by the U.S.S.R. in his country. And since the communist system was being forced upon the economy, he thought it was his painful duty to make the "punishment fit the crime", and ensure that the country's children were imbued with the values that would fit them for the communist system in politics and the economy.

His attempts failed dismally to achieve the "perfect fit" that was supposed to result from the imposition of a single dominant priority to which all other values and all other possible futures were blindly accommodated (Frentzel-Zagorska, 1989; Mokrzycki, 1990). The present painful transition of Polish economy, from its former command structure to that of the free market, shows the heavy toll the people have had to suffer in consequence of such misguided planning that has left Poles with an average yearly income of U.S. \$1,685. Australia's yearly income, although declining in relation to other advanced industrial nation, is still above U.S. \$20,000. Australia is also a parliamentary democracy, and therefore, free from the danger of the type of authoritarian impositions that were experienced in Eastern and Central Europe.

"NATIONAL PRIORITIES" AND UNIVERSITIES

However, some recent initiatives of the Australian Federal government in education, and especially in tertiary education, give ground for serious disquiet. As one of the most senior Australian social scientists and a former President of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Peter Karmel (1991), has pointed out, there are dangers in the government's attempt to harness universities to its own "national priorities". Their imposition produces tension between autonomy of the institution and the requirements of the government in pursuit of national priorities -priorities which he claims are not even self-evident. In his view, university autonomy is vital, not just for its own sake, but because universities are "better able to achieve their purpose by self-government than by detailed intervention on the part of authorities". According to Karmel, that purpose is to,

produce graduates who will be able to cope with yet unknown situations... undertaking research which explores the limits of knowledge and therefore moving into unknown areas. [In contrast] Government priorities aim to solve known problems in a known world and are necessarily short term. [Hence] it may well be in the national interest to allow institutions like universities a relatively free hand to determine their own priorities.

Professor Karmal justifies this view on the grounds that plurality of priorities may better cope with an unknown future than any set of rigidly determined ones -as has been illustrated by reference to the different fates of countries in the West, as compared to those in Eastern Europe. According to Karmel, in the long run, the universities' commitment to the search for knowledge for its own sake, is likely to be of greater value for society as a whole than the subordination of all research effort to some ideologically predetermined goal.

RE-STRUCTURING AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

The deep current malaise in Australian universities has come in the wake of the most fundamental restructuring of the Australian tertiary education system ever to be undertaken by a Federal government. Its aim has been the satisfaction of assumed "national priorities" by means that to many, if not most academics, seem to threaten the *raison d'être* of universities and their own commitment to seeking out new knowledge and teaching it to their students. The restructuring was enforced very largely by the unrelenting efforts of the present Minister of Education, John Dawkins. The aim which could be deduced from his ministry's reports, such as Higher Education: A Policy Statement (the White Paper, 1988) and Higher Education: The Challenges Ahead (1990), could be summarized as follows:

- (1) Expansion of the number of students in higher educational institutions to achieve the government's aim of Australia becoming not only the "lucky", but also the "clever" country;
- (2) limitation on the funding for higher education, with cuts in areas deemed to be "unproductive";
- (3) direction of research effort into those priority areas which the government considers most advantageous to the economic development of the country.

Ruthless pursuit of these goals has had a profound effect upon the academic life of the country, as the government has used every effort to restructure the higher educational system and academic research, mainly through its control of funding. The drastic measures adopted have been interpreted by the majority of academics as a violation of the specific culture of universities as scholarly and self-governing institutions, through their subordination to the dictates of the central bureaucracy in the Department of

Employment, Education and Training (DEET), and conversion into instrumentalities of a transient government's social and economic policies.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF AMALGAMATION

The most sweeping of these changes has involved the abolition of the two-tiered or binary system of tertiary education (the universities, on the one hand, and the colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology, on the other) and a reduction in the number of tertiary institutions (19 universities and 45 colleges in 1985) through amalgamation to 35 universities. In the eyes of many, DEET's restructuring of Australian tertiary institutions into the Unified National System satisfies government criteria and demands which are more suited to industrial corporations than to institutions for higher learning. This move is increasingly perceived as a culmination of the Federal government's efforts to assert direct control, which began when it assumed responsibility for all the funding for higher education in 1974.

The issue of amalgamation of vastly different institutions, with diverse traditions and ethics, and staff that ranged from internationally renowned scholars to teachers without higher degrees or any research record, has convulsed the Australian scene with varying results -but also invariably involving enormous loss of teaching and research time and its diversion to fruitless "politicking" and endless time spent on committees.

The government's belief in the savings which were to accrue from the uniformity of all institutions (that were not to fall below 8,000 students to qualify for full funding) has so far produced meagre results. According to the editor of the British scientific journal Nature (April 11, 1991),

The objective, in what the Prime Minister calls "the clever country" is admirable: higher education and advanced training for as many as possible. But uniform rules of thumb (on, for example, the economic size of a university) have taken precedence over a proper regard for the welfare of institutions, which can be most easily crippled by being arbitrarily pushed about often enough.

In some cases the mergers have actually been accomplished and may bear some kind of fruit in a decade or so. In other cases, the proposed unions have broken down irretrievably after the expenditure of considerable costs (both manifest and hidden) of time, money and energy.

The latest example in a series of "disamalgamations" is the University of New England, where the Academic Board voted in July 1991 to dissolve an enforced union with a college of advanced education, after 89% of staff on the original university campus in Armidale was found to oppose it because of a "failure to bring about any true consolidation of academic activities due to geographic separation and differences in academic orientation of the two campuses" (W. West, 1991, p. 11).

Where amalgamation attempts with a university have failed, two or more colleges or technological institutes have combined into brand new "universities". Almost inevitably, the nomination of some of the lecturing staff as fully-fledged "professors" has produced indignation in the older established universities, where distinguished academics have for long been held back in their promotion because of a shortfall of funds imposed by the government. At the same time, the leaders of the new "universities" have come out openly demanding equality of status and funding, and warning that their institutions would otherwise succumb to "second class status" and impotence. According to Alan Mead (1991, p. 17), vice-chancellor of the new University of South Australia (USA),

Any survey or rankings conducted now will apply to a period where two thirds of the universities and colleges in the system are new. It is hardly the time to make accurately, logically and equitably based assessments of a system so drastically and recently restructured.

The Dawkins reforms have thus sown seeds of internal dissension within the institutions, since while established academics are seeing their research funding and chances of promotion dwindling, at a time when their teaching engagements and student numbers are growing rapidly, Professor Mead, speaking for the newly merged institutions, complains that funding inequalities in the existing system favour the older and more established universities. Those institutions who have successfully defied government's pressure to amalgamate have not fared much better since they have been penalised for their refusal to cooperate by cuts in access to capital and research funding.

RESEARCH FUNDING AND "NATIONAL PRIORITIES"

At the heart of the debate over university structures and autonomy is the question of the nature of research and its place in the university - a debate which is not limited to Australia, but is being heard throughout the

international academic community. At one extreme of the debate is the assumption (currently in favour with the Federal Australian government) that research is not an activity for **all** academics, or **all** universities. As a result research funding is being channelled to those who are deemed to be "successful", by working as members of large teams on investigations geared to "national priorities". Acting on this principle, the government has withdrawn from university budgets some of the funds which had been used to finance research activities. The impact of this move has been felt especially in the humanities and social sciences, which require relatively little funding but are more consuming of staff time. The consolidated savings have been allocated to the Australian Research Council (ARC). Academics must compete for these research funds, and in this way "claw" back revenue to their universities. Under ministerial "inspiration", ARC has tended to favour the allocation of large scale grants to specific Centres of Excellence, or more recently National Key Centres, which often directly reflect priorities set by the government in achieving its economic, political and social objectives. At the same time, universities have been encouraged to supplement this research funding by being entrepreneurial and attracting funds from non-government sources.

The domination of research funding by the ARC has exerted a number of negative effects upon the university community. One of these is the frantic activity which occurs periodically, not on the basis of the intellectual challenge of one's work but in an effort to formulate yet another proposal that might please the ARC by fitting in with "national priorities". Academic staff are being placed under increasing pressure to submit more time-consuming, but also that of their institution that is at stake. Indeed, the success of the universities in "clawing back" the research funds is increasingly used as a bench-mark for their status in the country.

The deleterious consequences of such practices are at least two-fold. One is the psychological damage that follows failure, which is inevitable for the majority of academics, since between two-thirds and three-quarters of people who make an initial application receive a severe check to their confidence through the rejection of their application. Such failures often result in attempts to invest even more time in formulating projects which may have little bearing on the academic's own interests and experience, but which are artificially geared to the "national priorities". The competition for funds has also generated the suspicion of "sponsorship" or "cronyism" on the part of ARC in favour of certain well established academics and their institutions. However unfounded such accusations may be, they constitute "social facts", since they are often believed by individuals, especially in

universities that receive a disproportionately small percentage of the grants. On the other hand, the most successful universities, such as Adelaide (which, with almost similar student numbers to Wollongong and one and a half times its staff, managed to score seven times more grants in 1991) feel vindicated in their resentment at cuts in their teaching funds and in being classified for status and salary purposes on the same level as "universities" which receive an even smaller fraction of grants than was scored by Wollongong.

The domination of tertiary funding by "national priorities" has, therefore, exerted a negative effect on the way Australia has been developing its human resource potential, since it has neglected the culture of scholarship which is the hallmark of university education - and which applies to university students, as well as to their lecturers. Nor can the culture of scholarship be regarded as the cultivation of "ivory tower" mentality by a small number of privileged academics. Instead, it represents a symbiotic relationship between teaching and research in which each informs and stimulates the other. From this perspective, knowledge and creativity are fundamentally different in nature from the commodities of the economic production line. Often the most crucial element required for innovative research is time for thinking and reflection. It is this "commodity", above all, that is becoming increasingly difficult for academics to find, because of the pressure of additional teaching duties and higher student-staff ratios in what, in at least some cases, can be described as poorly funded "mega-universities".

FRUSTRATION AT THE MISUSE OF HUMAN RESOURCES

The frustration of academic staff at the government's disregard of their cultural values and the conditions of work that are needed to sustain them, has been uncovered in a recent survey undertaken by the Higher Education Fighting Fund, a group based at the Australian National University in Canberra (G. Leech, 1991, p. 11). The survey, in which well over 2500 academics (out of some 27,000 employed in 39 universities) took part, showed deep dissatisfaction with the government's educational philosophy.

Almost three quarters of the respondents fail to detect any coherent educational policy behind government initiatives, and assert that, in their own experience, their university has "slipped in standards, competence and integrity". Nine out of ten academics participating in the survey think DEET's role in promoting excellence in teaching and research is "deleterious", with most of them blaming amalgamations for this state of affairs.

Dr. David Kemp (1991, p. 11), a former professor of political science and opposition spokesman for education, lamented that the present policies emphasized quantity, rather than quality and imposed immense pressures towards uniformity. With the prospect of fewer staff and more students at the turn of the century - with its potentially devastating consequences for the quality of our universities - reflects in many ways the enormous loss of confidence which has occurred. Australia is now bleeding from a brain drain of calamitous proportions...".

On the basis of a report of the National Institute of Labour Studies, Professor Kevin Marjoribanks (1991, p. 27), Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide, predicted that,

unless academic salaries become competitive with those of other groups in Australia and with the salaries of academics overseas, will enhance excellence in teaching and research. ...It is essential that those who represent academics must indicate to governments that the very survival of the Australian higher education system is under threat if appropriate salaries and conditions are not provided for academics.

According to a former Minister for Science in the present government, Barry Jones (June, 1991),

We might by the year 2000 have returned to a binary system of tertiary education either de facto or de jure, recognising with hindsight, that different people have different needs, and that institutions can and should provide a variety of approaches, not all necessarily under the title of university.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUSTRALIA'S LINGUISTIC RESOURCES

The unsatisfactory development of human resources in tertiary education could be observed in several academic areas, one of which has been that of language education. During previous symposia, reference has been made to the multi-ethnic and multilingual composition of the Australian population and to the changing policies on how to develop this particular aspect of the country's human resources (Smolicz, 1988, 1991). The need for such development has been perceived as involving not only the internal concerns of Australia, but also the successful use of its multilingual population in improving the country's relations with its Asian and Pacific neighbours. The growing proportion of Australians of Asian ancestry can be

viewed as an additional resource which may confer the advantage of increasing trade in our region.

Following the Australian government's adoption of multicultural policies, which favoured a degree of diversity within a unified national framework (Smolicz, 1984), a series of new policy initiatives was launched both at State and Federal levels. The publication of the report on National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987) and its adoption by the Federal Government could be regarded as the successful culmination of these efforts.

The newest area of controversy in education is related to DEET's apparent reversal of this policy. The Lo Bianco Report stressed the need to rationalise the country's linguistic resources by keeping a dual focus in relation to languages other than English. The first was to create the conditions which permit those Australians who already speak a language other than English as their first language to consolidate and develop it further through English, if they so desire. The other was for people from English speaking backgrounds to have every opportunity and incentive to build a linguistic bridge towards their fellow citizens in Australia, and/or to Australia's neighbours in Asia, or to people of interest elsewhere with the possibility that one and the same language may fulfil all these functions (internal, trade, political, etc...).

The National Policy on Languages offered a balanced and coordinated approach which combined the elements of social justice, the economic and international needs of the nation and access to a variety of cultural and linguistic perspectives for all Australians. The positive features of this policy are unfortunately missing in the latest DEET policy paper (Dawkins, December 1990), which fails to recognize the intrinsic connection between language learning and literacy and the way in which the learning of languages other than one's own can play a vital role in the acquisition of a full range of literacy in one's first language. A study of languages, such as Mandarin, Japanese or French would provide students not only with the opportunity to acquire literacy in that tongue, but would also exert a positive effect on their English. This opportunity is being diminished for English speaking background (ESB) students. The full implication, however, of the loss of linguistic resources as a result of such a confused policy is seen in its effect upon NESB (non-English speaking background) students. In order to maximise the development of their linguistic resources, NESB students need to be given the opportunity to acquire literacy in their home languages. Once this basis is established, they can effectively apply their literacy skills to English.

The pursuit of educational approaches based on the latest language policy proposals would endanger many of the unique multicultural developments in Australian society. These include multilingual radio and television, university entrance examinations in a wide range of languages, bilingual programs, public library holdings in a number of languages and the telephone interpreter service. All of these have been helping to foster and reinforce Australia's linguistic resources, which all too often in the past have remained under-developed.

The language policy adopted by Australia is of great significance in regard to our relationship with Asia. The energetic pursuit of a language policy which fosters literacy development of the Asian language resource within the Australian community, can contribute enormously to improved relations and communications with Asia. Greater readiness to recognize the languages and cultures of Asian-Australians would encourage an increased acceptance and trust of Australia among its Asia neighbours. In addition, Asian-Australians, with high levels of oral language skills and greater understanding of the cultures concerned, are in an excellent position to contribute greatly to bridging the gaps in Asia-Australian relationship. The application of the undiluted version of the government's own National Policy of Languages is also in line with one of the conclusions reached at the Christchurch symposium, of ASSREC. People in the Asian-Pacific region were to be encouraged to become multilingual through the application of national language policies that freed the development of those human resources that were currently locked in within the populations concerned, and often remained unrecognized and unused.

HRD AND "HIGH" LITERACY

It is not the object of this paper to draw, in educational terms, the image of Australia as a "bleak" country - as opposed to its former representation as lucky, and the Prime Minister's desire to see it as a "clever" one. If his objective is a wise and intelligent nation, it is necessary to pay more heed to the proper development of human resources that is in keeping with the particular culture of the community. It is unfortunate that some recent changes cast a shadow on positive developments which had been taking place whether in language teaching or in education generally.

Criticism of the more recent policy in the development of human resources within the Australian educational system has world-wide implications, since in many ways concern over educational standards is a universal

phenomenon. Fifty years ago an English historian, Trevelyan said that, "Education has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading". The situation today may not have improved as dramatically as some educators might like to think. Richard Hoggart, English author of the classic The Uses of Literacy, has significantly named his current observations on the subject as The Abuses of Literacy. In Hoggart's (1991, p. 22) view, "most leave school critically, culturally and imaginatively sub-literate". This failure to develop our educational potential has several sources, some manifest, others latent or more subtle and covert. Among the former is the elevation of the directly vocational aspects of education at the expense of those wider elements which aim to provide the opportunity for people to rise above the satisfaction of society's most basic material needs.

This narrowly utilitarian attitude is now percolating to the universities, with ministerial agencies trying to dictate areas where academics are "encouraged" to investigate. Hoggart considers this attitude to be particularly pernicious and labels it as a new sort of "relativism", in which "it is bad form call one thing 'better than' another", so that making of judgements is made to appear as some kind of "an old fashioned heresy".

The ideological attitude that encourages "sameness" and uniformity has its economic counterpart in the support that it provides to commercialism and consumerism. Such consumption is supported by a mass of people who are officially literate, but unable to exercise a higher degree of judgement through being trapped at a low level of literacy. This state of affairs has long been tolerated for the "masses", but it is alarming in the way it has now made an encroachment into tertiary education, with many institutions no longer deserving a "higher" educational label, by ceasing to transmit the more profound or "high" levels of literacy.

The relativist attitude of justifying this loss of resource potential in the case of "other people", including students, on the grounds that in a democratic society "this is their choice", cannot be accepted by those of us who, as university academics, would not be satisfied with such a low level of interest and scholarship for ourselves (and our own families). Our understanding of "the best" of what has been said and written in our own cultures, as well as in the culture of others, must be transmitted to others in our care - with universities fulfilling the role of influencing the mass of society, rather than the other way round. Fortunately the majority of Australian academics still perceive their duty both in their research and in

their attempt, through teaching, to broaden the horizons of their students and achieve this "higher" level of literacy.

The famous Irish chemist, Sir Robert Boyle, concluded that "nature abhors a vacuum". The same can be said of cultures. If university academics, in Australia or elsewhere in our region, do not stand for "something" and insist on the academic content of the curriculum as they themselves perceive it, they will not merely be standing for "nothing". There will be no cultural vacuum. Instead, by abdicating their cultural responsibilities, they will be allowing our thinking to be invaded by what Hoggart described as a "valueless populism" in all matters intellectual.

The response of Australian academics, although slow initially, shows that despite the pressure towards mindless uniformity, universities still remain vital centres of intellectual life that develop human resources to higher levels of literacy, beyond the humdrum slogans and consumer-inspired outpourings. The example of Central European universities and the academics there, who have survived four decades of "socialist realism", inspires one with the hope that we can withstand the forces of consumerism and uniformity. In this struggle to liberate the human resources of our population, academics and other intellectuals of our region must stand together.

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