Reflection and future direction in tertiary education: Australia’s educational reforms

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Introduction

Structural changes in tertiary education have occurred on a global scale for the past decade or so. Generally, these changes are in response to the prevailing economic, technological and demographic trends. Two basic international trends can be discerned, namely,

a. the movement towards smaller numbers of large, multipurpose, multi-discipline tertiary educational institutions; and

b. the autonomy of tertiary educational institutions is conditional on meeting the objectives set by the government, such as demonstrating efficiency and societal relevance (Goedegebuure and Meek, 1991: 7).

Australia’s current educational reforms are affected by the same economic, technological and demographic considerations. Nations like Australia have to respond to the challenges of competing for scarce resources in a world environment scrambling for economic growth through productivity gains and broadening the market share. In the new economic order, there is recognition that countries which invest most in education will be the most competitive.

Naisbitt and Aburdene (1991: 3), in their expositions on the challenges of the Information Age, argued the need for tertiary education institutions to respond proactively and intelligently in developing educational and training programs which can produce people “who can think critically, plan strategically, and adapt to change”. This is the essential requirement of a brain-based society or a clever country (Toffler, 1991).

In the light of these global changes, what strategic response should tertiary education institutions take would be a key consideration of educational planners and managers. An important first step in any strategic plan is the understanding of the operating environment at the global, national and local level. The purpose of this paper is to provide an exploration of the changes in tertiary education brought about by government reforms in the West and Australia. Underlying this general purpose are the following aims:

1. To examine the tertiary education environment in a global context by comparing Australia’s reforms with the other Western industrialised countries,

2. To explore the responses of our tertiary education institutions to these reforms, and

3. To consider the future direction of tertiary education in Australia and in this context, a multi-sectorial (TAFE-Higher Education) model is put forward to illustrate the likely structural and managerial trend in which Australian tertiary education institutions may adopt.
Educational reforms in the west and in Australia

Neave and van Vught (1991: 239) gave a comprehensive account of the educational reforms in the West since the end of the Second World War. The increasingly important role of government in tertiary education planning has been influenced by two main factors. These factors are:

1. the rising tide of ‘social demand’ for tertiary education which leads to the rapid expansion of tertiary education systems; and

2. the policy of governments to match the production of the tertiary education system with workforce demand and the requirements of the labour market.

The concerns of these factors and the steps taken to deal with them by governments have often been interpreted as direct intrusion and a threat to autonomy by tertiary education institutions. This fear of the consequences of government intervention in tertiary education had begun in the 1970s when governments resorted to using financial stringency and budgetary compression to pressure institutions to achieve operational efficiency and management rationality. The same kind of pressure continued into the 1980s.

Two important developments occurred in the drive towards efficiency among the institutions in, the 1970s and 1980s, viz.,

a. the “significant changes in the process of management at institutional level; and

b. the reinforcement by government of ‘contracting’ as an instrument of direction and the particular weight attached to the issues of quality and accountability” (ibid.: 242).

In 1991 the situation is no different. Tertiary education institutions in Australia, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States still face the problems of resource constraints. Yet institutions are expected to achieve efficiency by

- turning out more graduates at less cost,
- enrolling more students, and
- achieving economies of scale (mainly through institutional amalgamation as in the case of Australia and the Netherlands).

These developments have required tertiary education institutions to demonstrate their own capacities for strategic management which include:

a. the ability to use resources efficiently in accordance with set objectives; and

b. the foresight to develop institutional plans over the medium and the long term which can respond both creatively and directly to the political and economic environment.

In the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and many other countries, governments allocate funds on the basis of the strategic planning documents submitted by the institutions, showing their ability to achieve economic efficiency, quality of outcome, student access and accountability. In addition the tertiary education sector needs to adapt to the raised expectations of the community and to provide relevant quality education to a growing and increasingly diverse student body (Nicholl, 1991: 5).

There are some striking similarities in tertiary education reform and restructuring in Australia, Europe (such as The Netherlands, Norway, Federal Republic of Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Ireland and Sweden) and the United States. Some of these similarities are:
1. The tertiary education system in Europe and Australia (and to some extent the United States) has been characterised traditionally by strong, centralised bureaucratic control. Institutions have to adhere to the elaborate regulatory frameworks in order to secure their funding. In recent years, despite the restructuring, this central control has not weakened.

2. Reduction in the number of institutions by means of mergers or amalgamations and the concomitant enlargement of the size of establishments with more diversified teaching and research programs.

3. Minimum enrolment levels set for institutions. In the case of Australia, a minimum student load of 2000 is required before an institution can become a member of the Unified National System. In the Netherlands, it is 600 students.

4. Institutions are required to operate in accordance with market developments like business corporations. Attention is focused on profiles, increases in the numbers of graduates and institutional performance, a diversified student supply, and better adjustment of course supply to labour market demands. Governments seem to take the view that if institutions are allowed to (or are forced to) compete more directly with a free and open market, they will become more efficient and effective, more responsive to industrial needs and economic imperatives, more productive and better managed.

5. Establishment of a unified national system (UNS) which
   • eliminates differences in status between different kinds of education on the same level;
   • facilitates the choice of studies for the students and the allocation of resources to studies of similar kinds;
   • meets the demands for research connections between different types of tertiary education without setting up separate and small research departments outside the university;
   • facilitates transferability of credit between all types of institutions within the system;
   • facilitates enrolment in post-secondary training programs from all types of undergraduate training; and
   • facilitates the development of new courses through the use of modules from the various disciplines and departments.

   The exception is the Netherlands in which restructuring has brought about the formal establishment of a binary system of tertiary education.

How tertiary institutions have taken to these reforms in Australia is discussed in the next section.

**Response to educational reforms: The Australian context**

Dawkins’ (1988) *Higher Education - a policy statement*, commonly called The White Paper, set the agenda for reforms in the Australian higher education sector. The overall aim of the reforms is to create a higher education system which provides maximum benefit to individuals, institutions and the community as a whole (ibid.: 11). The reform agenda which was succinctly summarised by Harman (1989: 20) includes the following:

1. Abolition of the binary system and replacement by a new unified national system (UNS) of higher education.

2. Major consolidation of institutions through amalgamation to form larger units.
3. Substantial increases in the provision of student places and various efforts to improve student progress rates in order to increase the output of graduates.

4. Increased emphasis on fields such as applied science, technologies, computer science and business studies, perceived to be of crucial importance to economic recovery and economic growth.

5. A more selective approach to research funding, with increased emphasis on research on topics of national priority, and substantial increases in research funding.

6. Changes to the composition of governing bodies to make them more like boards of companies, and strengthening of management of universities and colleges, particularly to give much greater power and authority to chief executive officers.

7. Major changes in staffing, particularly aimed at increasing the flexibility of institutions, improving staff performance, and enabling institutions to compete more successfully in staff recruitment in priority areas.

8. Changes to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness of the higher education system, including reduced unit costs in teaching, improved credit transfers and rationalisation of external studies.

9. Moving of some of the financial burden for higher education to individuals and the private sector, and encouraging institutions to generate some of their own income.

The new structural arrangements have generated heated public debate in the tertiary education community. In the area of administration, the main criticism levied against the newly adopted policy approaches was the erosion of autonomy in institutional decision making. Besides, a lot of paper work has been created for administrators, especially for the annual institutional profile exercise. The situation is further compounded by the heavier workload for academic staff and depleting teaching and non-teaching resources.

As in any reform, the initial stages can be quite traumatic. Policies are often rejected or negated by an implementation process highly influenced by entrenched institutional tradition and vested interest, no matter how rational or equitable the goals appear to be (Wildavsky, 1970). Institutions in general display an inertia towards reforms. The tertiary education institutions in particular resist change by focusing on the core operations in order to safeguard what is typical for universities and colleges.

The reforms, however, are not without its supporters. Meek and Goedegebuure (1989: 16) have shown that the majority of the institutional leaders (chancellors, vice-chancellors, registrars and their college counterparts) supported the proposed broad changes as presented in the White Paper. Their findings indicated that

- almost 70 per cent of the respondents in the survey were of the opinion that the elimination of the binary system is desirable,
- almost 80 per cent believed that competition within the system should increase and that educational diversity both within and between institutions should increase, and
- over 90 per cent felt that
  - institutional management should be strengthened,
  - strategic management should become an integral part of the management practice,
  - there should be formal arrangements to assess the quality of both teaching and research, and
  - the Australian system should develop into a more adaptive, responsive, and competitive system to face the challenges of the Information Age.

However, the evidence of an agreement does not mean that every one is happy with the reforms. The debate is still simmering. It is not the purpose of this paper to delve further into this debate which targets
mainly structural matters such as increasing the output, reducing the number of smaller institutions, shifting funding emphasis and managerial issues. We are concerned with the priorities in which institutions should set in meeting the challenges of the present and future.

**Setting priorities in tertiary education**

The general weakness of the White Paper is that it lacks a clearly defined set of national educational goals and rationale to guide institutions through the reforms. This issue has been a long-standing problem in the higher education sector. As far back as 1962, P.H. Partridge (1962: 53-54) pointed out that the educational sector has overly emphasised “means and resources” and neglected the “academic or intellectual aims, achievements and condition of the universities.” He added that

> “there seems to have been little curiosity about the changing character of the society of which they are part, and about their own changing functions in the social and in the wider intellectual life of the community.”

In the Information Age which we are now in, the “knowledge explosion” and the widespread changes in the social and technological arena demand a broad educational foundation in undergraduate programs. Though the White Paper has identified the problems of narrowness and inflexibility in undergraduate curricula and emphasised the need to broaden the education experiences of the undergraduates, it has not provided the implementation strategies on how this can be achieved.

The Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (SSCOEET) in its 1990 report has identified the following priorities which institutions should set in order to provide maximum educational and training benefit to the nation as a whole:

1. **Quality of teaching**

Quality of teaching is an important component in developing a “clever” country. This has been a burning issue in various recent reports. The Tenure of Academics (1982), Review of Efficiency and Effectiveness of Higher Education (1986), the Green Paper and the White Paper have mentioned the importance of teaching quality.

The White Paper, for instance, indicates that the staffing policy in institutions should provide “an environment in which individual excellence in teaching, research and other related functions can be recognised and rewarded, and in which inadequate performance is not protected.” In fact in the near future, funding will be increasingly based on institutional performance.

The SSCOEET (1990:57) “takes the view that the quality of teaching has a profound influence on the calibre of graduates and their capacity to contribute to the well-being of the nation.” “... Australia requires graduates who are educated in the fullest sense of the term — graduates who are sensitive to the social environment in which they live and work, who are critical, analytical thinkers, and who are able to respond creatively to the challenges of a complex and rapidly changing world. These capabilities will only be fostered by a learning environment which offers genuine intellectual stimulation. They are unlikely to emerge from situations which merely encourage passive absorption of knowledge. Effective teaching is a vital factor in achieving the national educational goals of a clever country.”

2. **Access to and participation in tertiary education**

There is evidence that quality of teaching has a direct effect on attrition rates — a problem of particular interest in view of current concerns to maximise access for disadvantaged groups, and to increase the output of graduates. As cited in the SSCOEET (1990: 59), a 1987 study of student performance observed that “gaining access to higher education is one thing; completing a qualification is another. ... if we are serious about participation and equity, then the only way to increase graduation rates without sacrificing standards of excellence would be to improve the quality of teaching”.
To increase access and participation, Baldwin (the Federal Minister for Higher Education) has proposed the following:

- that the overall adult (17-64 years) participation rate should be maintained at 1990 levels of 3.9 per cent of the total adult population.

- a higher proportion of mature-age students and postgraduates will be admitted in line with the ‘clever country’ economic policies.

- 1992 average operating funds per student should be used as a ‘reference level’ for the next ten years and ‘capital and renovation funds’ should remain at 1990 levels for six years.

- review of Austudy, especially dealing with problems faced by those transferring from TAFE to higher education.

- diversifying funding — institutions are encouraged to seek financial autonomy through greater degree of entrepreneurial activity. The Higher Education Council emphasises private sources of funding and industry training needs.

For effective access and participation, however, there are several barriers to overcome. These include:

- the need to simplify and to unify nationally the requirements for entry to tertiary education courses so as to facilitate access for all socio-economic groups, and for interstate mobility by enabling students to select institutions and courses appropriate to their needs;

- a policy to provide flexible entrance arrangements as well as funding to assist disadvantaged groups; and

- the establishment of an efficient and effective national credit transfer system which also recognises skills, experience and knowledge gained outside of academic institutions.

3. Life-long learning

As far back as 1974, the Kangan Report on Technical and Further Education in Australia (pp. 17-18) made the following observation:

> It is an unreal view of modern life that people can store up sufficient education during the compulsory years of schooling or within their initial vocational education in the trades, technologies or the professions, to last them a lifetime of change. The facts are different. To take advantage of new opportunities for personal and job satisfaction, updated job knowledge or changes of occupation, people need, and can benefit from, different addition to their education at different times in their lives.

> ... continuing professional education contributes directly to economic growth through skilling, re-training and updating knowledge in a climate of rapid social and technological change.

In countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for example, the profound social changes that have occurred have contributed to the rapid growth of adult education. The reasons for this growth which are also applicable to the current situation in Australia, include:

- a growing recognition that the benefits of technological change can only be fully realised if people are able to acquire the necessary skills;

- a realisation that structural changes in the economy will require increasing numbers of adult workers to change occupations; and
the aging of the labour force, which will make it less realistic to rely on young labour market entrants as the principal source of innovation and adaptation (OECD, 1985: 7)

While the Australian government has recognised the significance of life-long learning in the Information Age (also a strategy the visions of Australia Reconstructed, 1987), it has adopted the position of the "user-pays" principle. As clearly stated in the White Paper (1988: 70), professional and vocationally-based continuing education in general should operate on a cost-recovery basis, taking account of direct and indirect costs. The income generated should be used to subsidise courses for disadvantaged groups and participation by low income earners in other adult education programs. This attitude not only affects the development of life-long education, directed at updating skills, in Australia but also pays lip-service to its policy of equity and access, especially for the disadvantaged groups.

Reiterating the growing importance of life-long education in the social and economic development of the country, the SSCOEET avers that it life-long education must be the key element in Australia’s education and training system. On this basis, the SSCOEET (1990: 100-101) recommends the following:

- adequate funding should be provided for life-long education,
- establish a National Accreditation Agency as proposed by the Australian Association of Adult and Community Education,
- promote research and professional development in life-long education to improve the quality of services offered, and
- develop a national data base about the nature and extent of life-long education within the tertiary education system.

The SSCOEET's national priorities for tertiary education as identified in the above section seem to point to the direction of an open learning and comprehensive system of tertiary education where there are no barriers to access and participation at all levels of the educational process. As indicated by Nicholl (1991: 3), the tertiary education of the future would be a system which is as open as possible, accessible to people of all ages and from all backgrounds, servicing the needs of industry, the public sector, unions and community groups. For this to occur, there is a need to establish a multi-sectoral system where the distinction between higher education and the TAFE sectors which now exists is reconstituted to form a continuum of tertiary education.

**Future direction in tertiary education: The multi-sectoral institution**

At the higher education institutional level, the ability to adapt and innovate is an important issue, especially in an environment of scarce resources and stiff competition. Student growth in the past and next few years has forced many institutions to operate below funding standards and minimum space. Declining financial resources have incapacitated the ability of institutions to update library stock, provide pastoral services to students, renovate dilapidated buildings, and improve teaching services. Yet the pressure on higher education institutions to strengthen their competitive position is likely to intensify, rather than abate, in the foreseeable future.

Colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) are under the same pressure to compete in the market place. The future of public TAFE provision is under serious review and discussion in Federal Government circles. The Deveson Inquiry of 1990, commissioned by the Federal and State governments to assess the costs and implications of training from the current overhaul of the wage award restructure, has recommended the introduction of TAFE tuition fees and a competitive training market (Spiers, 1990).

Given the complementarity of the skill orientation of TAFE programs and the more theoretical approaches of higher education institutions, it is only logical for the two sectors to amalgamate to provide enhanced opportunities for diversification of funding sources, especially due to the strong potential links between
TAFE and industry. Such a system would assist in building a flexible, versatile workforce which is able to cope with rapidly changing technology.

There are, however, barriers which hamper the TAFE-Higher Education linkages owing to the historical development of the two sectors which are not encountered in most other Western industrialised countries. As such the inter-mobility between the two sectors are restrictive to the detriment of the nation’s human resource enrichment. For example, Dawkins’ (1987: 38-39) Higher Education, A Policy Discussion Paper or the Green Paper has identified the wastefulness of resources, the ad hoc nature, and the many inconsistencies of the existing credit transfer arrangements.

The question of credit transfer from TAFE courses to higher education was considered as confused, erratic and arbitrary among higher education institutions. Even within the TAFE sector, the assessing of TAFE qualifications for credit was ad hoc and wasteful. The SSCOEET (1990:145) noted that it is now generally accepted that considerations of economic efficiency and social equity require that skill acquisition be seen as a potentially continuous process. There should not be any arbitrary barriers to upgrading and distortions caused by untenable policy differences between institutions. “... Action should be taken on a national (as well as State and institutional) basis to ensure systematic academic transfer and an increase in the recognition given for skills, experience and knowledge gained outside of academic institutions” (ibid.)

The White Paper (1988: 36-38) did set out a number of principles designed to improve the credit transfer and course articulation situation. These principles encouraged more emphasis on standard accreditation procedures, better dissemination of information about credit arrangements, and the provision of an appeal system for the review of credit decisions. Institutions were required to adopt these principles as part of their condition for entry to the UNS. The higher education institutions, however, were concerned about the White Paper’s approach to the transfer of credit from TAFE courses. They envisaged the need for bridging courses in certain cases, and that additional funding would be required for this to occur. The displeasure of higher education institutions over such an arrangement is reflected in the following statement:

> Government must accept that such a scheme may well have a negative impact on completion rates as there are serious risks of failure for such transferring students. The University cannot accept responsibility for these risks. If unsatisfactory terms of credit transfer are imposed on this University by the government, then the University will need to maintain separate statistics on the completion rates for transfer students, and to publicise these in an endeavour to inform potential students of the risks involved (SSCOEET, 1990: 145).

Despite the concern of the higher education sector, the trend towards developing an egalitarian and comprehensive system of tertiary education is emerging in Australia, vis-a-vis the strong trends already established in the United States and Europe. Steps taken to set the system in place include:

- the establishment of the unified national system;
- the expansion of student places;
- the introduction of award restructuring and its emphasis on career paths and skills acquisitions;
- the implementation of National Training Guarantee, and the new emphasis on staff training and development;
- the improved relations between tertiary education and industry;
- a more enlightened attitude to credit transfer with TAFE and elsewhere;
- real commitment to equality of opportunity;
- the challenge of a revolution in post-compulsory schooling resulting in a clear majority of students remaining at school until the end of year 12;
the need to address the problems and potential problems created for public control and accountability by a growth in reliance on private sources of funding;

the Australian Education Council (AEC) Review Committee aims to provide “appropriate national curriculum principles designed to enable all young people ... to develop key competencies, with the associated implications for curriculum development, initial teacher preparation and continuing professional development” (Nicholl, 1991: 3-5)

Perhaps the European (Swedish, German and Dutch) and Japanese models of a unitary system of tertiary education would be a good example on how our future tertiary education system should be structured. This model facilitates the transferability of credit between all types of institutions within the system and facilitates enrolment in post-secondary training programs from all types of undergraduate training. The system permits multiple entry and exit (or stop out) points so that in theory a student with say only Year 11 secondary schooling could enter a certificate course and eventually work up to doctoral level qualifications.

Such a system will be considerably enhanced through a national system of course accreditation. Students transferring from one institution to another, or from one course to another within the same institution, should be able to gain maximum possible credit for work they have already done, and the administrative procedures involved in this should be as simple as possible. Currently a TAFE course completed in one State may not necessarily be recognised in another Australian state.

Furthermore, such a unitary system should provide an effective use of the departmental system so far as departments are regarded as the basic units of the institution. This arrangement should increase the contacts of the departments with different fields of study. It implies a certain guarantee of quality with regard to curriculum contents and research connections. It also facilitates the development of new courses through the use of modules from the various disciplines and departments.

A similar model, based on Pedley (1977) and that of West Germany’s “Gesamthochschule” has been suggested by Wallace (1988: 2). The model promotes a comprehensive educational environment which

- provides technological, commercial and social education;
- inculcates knowledge and skills with both a theoretical and applied focus;
- encourages and develops flexible and lateral thinking and entrepreneurial flair in its students; and
- facilitates and encourages research of an applied nature.

The model is based on the “policy of integration”: 

- physical integration, where possible, on the one site and organisation of all staff and students under the one administration;
- “integration of the curriculum into one course system in which there are still different courses and levels of courses but which are related to each other and permit the possibility of transfer.” (ibid.: 3)

According to Wallace, the system would provide the community with a variety of studies and activities appropriate to meet the multitude of individual needs. “It could only have the flexibility and resources to do so if it operated within a basic unity. Such a unity would facilitate:

a. opportunities for students to transfer without handicap or embarrassment from one course to another;

b. development of inter-faculty courses;

c. co-operative policy making and planning; and
d. the rational use of resources.

It would thereby encourage the reduction and eventual elimination of social and educational barriers.”

Wallace also suggested that a TAFE college be integrated with an institute of technology. In this way a fully intersectoral institution would be formed. Such an institution would offer a variety of cross-sectoral courses. It would have links with schools and would be able to educate students from certificate level through associate diplomas and degrees to doctorates.

The accreditation system would combine the strengths of the former university and the College of Advanced Education system of accreditation, that is, maintain a balance between local autonomy and the need to maintain quality of outcome and national course recognition. Perhaps an Australian Council of Academic Accreditation and Evaluation type of body could be established to accredit new courses and to periodically review existing courses. The latter should occur every 5 to 10 years in order to contain costs but also maintain sufficient accountability and currency of courses. Institutions should be permitted to amend courses in ‘the interim period to up to 50 per cent of the curriculum but not lengthen programs beyond six months without prior approval from the central body.

As have been identified by the SSCOEET (1990: 144), the advantages of an efficient and effective credit transfer system are several, viz.,

- it obviates the necessity of duplicating studies when transferring from one institution to another, or when pursuing two different but related qualifications. This is particularly important given the increasing mobility of students, and the tendency for growing numbers to undertake further studies after completion of a first diploma or degree.

- it assists students seeking to enter the higher education system after studies at TAFE level.

- improved credit transfer processes should result in more reliable assessments of previous qualifications and more streamlined administrative arrangements.

- it enables students to move as freely as possible within the system, and in which educational achievement is not blocked by unnecessary rigidities. Flexibility of this kind is an important element in coping with social and technological change.

The multi-sectoral institution, therefore, has the capacity to provide the integration of all levels of the tertiary education system and industry. Such a system would create the opportunity for interaction of skill formation, technology, work organisation, industrial relations, training and education which are so essential in determining a nation’s comparative advantage in this Information Age. So instead of permitting the tremendous wastage of human resources that still exists with the current institutional arrangements, the multi-sectoral system is geared towards harnessing the human factor to the quality and productivity challenge (Dix, 1985:6). Hence, in the restructuring process, an important strategy for institutional planners and managers to consider would be the adoption of the multi-sectoral model.

**Conclusion**

Resources allocated to tertiary education are productive investments for the future. It is absolutely essential that resource inputs have the capacity to value add both horizontally and vertically throughout the whole educational linkage process. Global environmental scanning on reforms in tertiary education has shown that in the Western industrialised economies and in Japan have developed strategies to provide opportunities for value adding throughout the whole spectrum of education and training of the educational system.

In Australia, despite the rapid growth of the tertiary education sector through improved access and participation, there are prevailing barriers to intra- and inter-institutional mobility. Traditional
universities, especially, still maintain an aloofness towards downstream linkage. Hence, the high wastage of human resources due to mis-opportunities and barriers to value add education and training continues.

To pursue the “clever country” ideal, there is a need to establish a new institutional structure (TAFE-Higher Education model) which facilitates movement between the TAFE and Higher Education sectors, especially in the context of credit transfer and course articulation. Such an institutional arrangement would provide opportunities for students of both sectors to have the advantages of practical skills training and conceptual learning.

It also generates maximal benefits from resources invested in the tertiary education system as well as maximisation of the individual student’s investment in education.

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