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Priorities for Policy Research

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I have been asked to talk about priorities for policy research. There are three areas that I think have been somewhat neglected - they are history, socialisation and curriculum - HSC

At first blush none of these topics may appear to have much to do with policy, so I want to make the case for their relevance to decisions at system level and within institutions.

History

"If men could learn from history what a lesson it might teach us! But passion and party blind our eyes, ..." S. T. Coleridge

The Dawkins drive for amalgamations could have had a better outcome if it had been informed by the results of previous attempts to merge. And any future enthusiasms for mega institutions will benefit if there are good accounts of what has happened since 1987.

Higher education is not strong on history - the teaching of it has declined alarmingly in universities (and schools also); and, more to my point, the current enthusiasms for change and reform in our higher education system lacks much sense of continuity with the past.

There are not many good institutional histories; and there is no history of the idea of a university in Australia; although a start was made 9 or 10 years ago when, at the height of the turmoil caused by government removal of intermediary bodies and other interventions, a group of leading historians decided to arrange a series of seminars, as they said, "to raise questions about the histories of Australian universities which might illuminate their present condition by reference to past ambitions, constraints, opportunities and failures."

The papers are published as *Ideas for Histories of Universities in Australia* (1990). More recently Coaldrake and Stedman's *On the Brink* (1998) is a stimulating examination of the idea of a university under challenging circumstances.

Largely because we lack a sense of history, there isn't, among Australian academics, a shared idea of what a university is. A university may be variously regarded as embracing everything that is post-secondary through to notions of highly selective and elite intellectual institutions. Arguments about the centrality of teaching or of research, or of the relation between the two, are rarely informed by experiences from the past.

If we'd had been a shared view of the nature and purposes of a university at the time of Dawkin's depredations the academic community would have made a better fist of dealing with it. As it was Academia was rudderless, not united and consequently, a pushover.

I am not suggesting that Dawkins was all bad, or that there is one right and shard view of the nature and purposes. Rather, that if the grab-bag of ideas carried by academics about universities had included common reference points, which I am suggesting can only realistically come from a sense of history, then the debates would have been more constructive and effective; and final policy decisions may have been of better quality.

Take another example. The idea of a community of scholars with senior and junior members is threaded

through the 800 year history of the modern university. It has implications for teaching and learning; for buildings and campus architecture, for distance education, for amalgamations. Yet many of our structures are designed as if learning is nothing more than a cognitive activity pertaining to one isolated individual. Student residences are too often designed as if they are simply amenities, rather than learning communities.

Let me make my point with an even more concrete example. The participants - students and staff - claim that the most successful affiliated campus ever in the history of Australian universities was the post WW2 university college at Mildura. There are few, apart from the participants, who now remember it. The participants' accounts maintain that Mildura's success was due to the coherent community that was formed of staff and students. We have no history of this innovation; of why it was apparently so successful; or why it failed and was closed.

Two more examples: The post war Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme (CRTS) of the 1940s and the Secondary Teachers Scholarship Schemes (and related schemes in other faculties) of the 1950s and 1960s were among the most democratising interventions in Australian university history, bringing to higher education thousands of people from sections of society never previously associated much with universities; and making sure that they graduated - women and school drop-outs; and those from the country and the other side of the tracks.

Both schemes operated with a total concept of what was needed for student success. As well as dealing with obstacles to participation by potential students - preparatory education where necessary, fees and living allowances - their residential needs were met and counselling, tutorials and moral support was provided. The practical use that evaluations of these schemes for informing current policies should be obvious.

Over the years I have suggested these schemes as topics for a history PhD, but there have been no takers, so far as I know. All we have is oral history, and that is disappearing fast. And, I suspect, the CRTS records which were once held by DETYA or its predecessors, have disappeared, along with much else, that if it were retained in the corporate memory, would help inform today's decisions. (That is not a criticism of DETYA, but rather of successive governments who do not see public service as a major civilising institution of society)

Curriculum

The term isn't used much in higher education, curriculum being regarded to something pertaining to schools. Yet it is the core of what we do; it is the formal definition of what students are supposed to learn. From time to time curriculum is of interest to government, for example during that period of enthusiasm, 6 or 7 years ago, for competencies; or the current concern about what employers want.

The OECD team which reviewed higher education drew attention to curriculum which, they said, was a sadly neglected area in Australian universities.

Where does curriculum come from? Who puts it together? On what authority? Who revises it? Who evaluates and approves it? Who tests students' learning? Where do the standards come from? Who is the custodian of standards? What is the public interest in curriculum? Are students themselves part of the curriculum; or student are amenities? Is university education in part a continuation of general education or is that supposed to have been completed at school? Does it matter that graduates have only the most rudimentary understanding of the society in which they are going to practice the profession we have qualified them for?

The advent of distance education has introduced a professionalism into the technicalities of curriculum design and delivery; and this is influencing on-campus delivery. Research has helped to answer some of the 'how?' questions of teaching, but the 'what?' questions remain.

There are other questions for researchers. Is there a conflict between the professions and university autonomy with respect to curriculum? I think there might be. The professions exercise considerable influence on what goes on in universities through their control of admission to professional practice. They are interested in a curriculum which is practical, immediately useful imparting the minimum competencies that are needed for practice. They are less interested in the scientific underpinning of a professional area than in 'what works'; in rule of thumb procedures for practice; less interested in general education, more in specialisation. Control is

exercised through professional committees, visitations and decisions against which there is no inclination to appeal.

Despite this substantial intervention in university affairs (which, although scarcely noticed, is, I suspect, greater than any government intervention in the operation of a university), there are rarely any signs of conflict or disagreement. Is this because of the dual role of the individuals concerned, who are frequently both the academic teachers and the professions representatives?

Research won't answer all these questions; nor should it. But good curriculum research can get us and our policy advisers thinking about them.

Socialisation

We are all interested in what happens to students; what impact the university experience has on them. Examination results tell a bit of the story. The theory of socialisation is a platform for asking about what happens to students. The formal curriculum is an agent of socialisation; so is the very influential informal curriculum experienced in the peer community. Socialisation is the preparation of individuals for roles in a culture.

Graduates have roles in the culture of work and as citizens in the community. Socialisation is the acquisition of the skills, dispositions and values necessary for effective role performance in those cultures. Professional socialisation for example sees the graduate as a very different human being from the recruit who entered the faculty four or six years earlier. The graduate has a considerable self-confidence which comes from assurance that he or she has mastered a considerable body of esoteric knowledge. The graduate also has values which will shape responses critical decisions and ethical conflicts in practice. How to balance the public interest and the professions interest; or client interest versus self interest.

Studies I have been involved with showed that the initial idealism of new students gets replaced by much more realistic profession centred values by the time of graduation. In cases of conflict it is the practitioner's needs that tends to prevail rather than client's; and professional solidarity over public interest. Where do these changes in values come from? And should they be of any concern of the university? Mission statements from a number of universities of the desirable characteristics of a graduate suggest that they may be.

Using socialisation to study what happens to students is a corrective to the view of students as nothing much more than 'brains on stilts' to quote one of our engineering students. It reminds us that, if we are studying the 'value added' contribution from the university experience, that cognitive gains are only one part of preparation for the role of graduate: that students are influenced by their social and their physical environment, that many learning experiences cannot be planned, but that amenable learning environments can be.

And along with priorities of topics go priorities of method. Longitudinal studies are the most powerful for informing a range of policy issues, as the Youth in Transition project has shown. This research was initiated by the ERDC, which placed longitudinal research at the top of its priority agenda, and allocated funds accordingly. The method isn't used much today - probably because it is costly and requires a longer time perspective than researchers or funding agencies are inclined to contemplate. But this method is essential if, for example, we are to study 'value adding', whether of the cognitive or the personal development sort.

The socialisation needs of older entrants and of young school leavers are different. Lachlan Chipman (The Australian HES, Oct 28, 1998) recently described a new no frills highly efficient, desiccated university stripped down the essential elements. No clubs and societies, no sports arenas, indeed no campus; indeed no amenities except some computer games and a table tennis table. This university would not be concerned with community or with values.

Maybe this would be an appropriate model for older students concerned only to advance their credentials. Is it a model for all students? If so why do we continue to build campus universities? That is regarded as a good practical question in some quarters. When governments start to answer it I hope that there will be research on the socialisation of students to help inform the debate.

Impact

How does the good news get through from the research domain to the policy domain?

Most often, it is after a considerable time lag; if at all, particularly with the sorts of research that I have been talking about. Policy advisers, however, want the answers by tomorrow, if not sooner. But we, and they, shouldn't be too impatient - for one thing there needs to be time for criticism and validation of research reports by peers; and for another it often takes time for knowledge from the research domain to get translated and resonate in the policy domain. The evaluation of the impact of fee abolition (also commissioned by the late Syd Dunn when he chaired ERDC) lay around for 10 years before it was used in the HECS policy process

When the research is concerned with 'systems maintenance' the results get through very easily and very directly; more so when 'systems maintenance' studies have been commissioned by the policy adviser. But even in such cases research is not always understood or used.

The excellent EIP series is a case in point. These are reports which need to be discussed and disseminated, but this does not happen much. This is not a criticism of DETYA, except perhaps to suggest that, when it commissions a study, or accepts a report, it might consider how it will be disseminated, and which topics ought to be debated throughout the system. This should probably not even be a main role for DETYA. Perhaps this is something that this organisation could be used for.

If policy research is to be encouraged and to be influential there does need to be an agency of independence which can set priorities, form an agenda of studies, ensure evaluation and publication, and promote system wide debate.

The ERDC is one model. It was a ministerial committee chaired by the late Syd Dunn. ERDC was to education as NHMRC is to medicine. (It was axed by the Fraser Government in 1980.) The US Carnegie Commission under Clark Kerr is another. Both produced high quality publications, organised and stimulated debate, and influenced policy.

But I trespass on tomorrow's agenda. I have argued that HSC has been neglected and deserves to be given some priority. You might respond that I have been talking about basic research which, by definition, has no policy relevance. I hope I have demonstrated that is not true. Equally, a case can be made for systems maintenance research, (and I do not use the term pejoratively) as being not only immediately useful, but also having the potential to yield insights into underlying processes. Just as basic studies can have important policy implications; systems maintenance studies, if conducted reflectively, can yield theoretical insights. The basic applied dichotomy is a false one; at least in social science.. Ask not whether it is applied or basic; but whose questions they are, and to whom the answers are directed. That, however, is another story.