

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND RESEARCH

Canberra, December 7-8, 1998

The future policy research context in Australia - issues and constraints

Stuart Hamilton, Executive director, Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee

Introduction

There are three broad areas I want to discuss today:

1. How to ensure an effective connection between research and policy development;
2. What are the areas of particular need for more research; and
3. Who holds the data and takes the lead role in analysis and publication.

1. Linking research and policy

It is always difficult to connect research to policy development. Research tends to be a long-term undertaking; policy development is driven by shorter-term aims where a year can represent a long time to work up a particular issue.

Policy makers are also often looking for information and general ideas more than particular solutions. This is particularly so if the 'solutions' put forward reflect ideal models of the world with no concession to the reality of competing pressures governments operate within.

- One case of this was some of the input studies provided with the west discussion paper, which analysed higher education with perhaps insufficient regard to real world application.

This does not mean it is impossible to link the two well.

- We are aware of the broader issues which face us over the next few years, some of which I'll mention in a moment; we know the areas where we lack suitable data and hence can seek to obtain it; and we know where there has been no analysis of the data that is available.
- Based on that sort of analysis we can then set out the areas that require attention so that research can feed into the policy process.

One issue to watch for is to avoid trying to research the immediate problems of today other than as direct consultancy. In all likelihood the results will be all too late or too limited to contribute much to the policy debate. Much research on labour force needs fails on this criterion.

2. What needs research?

'Lifelong Learning': What, Where and Why

One significant longer-term issue lies within all we now hear about 'lifelong learning', 'near universal access to tertiary education' and so on. We need to understand what this could mean and, from that, to understand what is required to make it happen - assuming that we agree it should happen.

It involves the interaction of higher education and the range of other post secondary or post compulsory education systems. Each of these is undergoing change; the interaction among them is changing too, which itself is a fit subject for research. Taking each briefly in turn:

- Higher education: in addition to the universities there are now an increasing number of other institutions providing higher education qualifications, notably in management and theology but also in a range of other specialty niches. This raises questions about the difference between 'university' higher education and other higher education and their relationship;
- Vocational education and training: this is a large, diffuse sector, which has gained substantial national coherence through a focus on providing industry driven vocational needs. It also includes a large element of personal enrichment studies which do not fit the alleged single-focus vocational goal of the sector;
- Post-compulsory schooling: in itself a somewhat strange notion at a time when we agonise each time we recede from 100% year 12 completion rates. The important issue is how schools or secondary colleges handle the dual expectation of their traditional role of setting years 11 and 12 students up for white collar work or university entry but also now providing effective connections to vocational education and training competencies, including through the increasing provision of 'vet in schools';
- Adult and community learning: this sector is the most diverse and least definable. It covers a great range, from basic skill development for those whose previous education did not provide those skills, to providing a non-threatening re-entry point for those returning to education after a long gap, to supporting recreational courses to keep mind and body active.
- We can expect learning for the third age to be more and more in demand as baby boomers like me age: but it does not fit easily with 'vocational' spin put on all the other elements.

We need to be clearer about why we have this array of education sectors: for example do we need to clarify the balance and relationship

- First of directly vocational objectives to general social knowledge and skills requirements;
- And secondly of providing the basis for a person's work and social achievement to providing the opportunity away from employment for a person to continue to stimulate their mind through education.

Just looking at the vocational objectives, we hear much about what employers want from a graduate who comes to work for them. What is less talked about is how 'day one' requirements align with the skills needed for a graduate to be able to move through a number of employers over an employment career. That is, the tension between the particular skill and the general ability to cope with change needs further exploration. Or putting it another way, does higher education, even in its vocational role exist to provide what employers want or what graduates need? How best to reconcile these demands would be a fruitful field for research.

Returning to the broader view, we also need to sort through how these all the sectors connect and how they might or should connect.

It is clearly no longer a question of streaming students through only one or other of the sectors, or of them following fairly defined pathways. Rather there is a multitude of possible options.

The question is how do people move within, through, across and around the sectors and why?

There has been much recent speculation about why people move from higher education to vocational education and training. What evidence there is undercuts any simple explanations - such as a desire to make more practical the degree achieved in higher education. In most cases there is a considerable time gap between the degree and vocational education and training enrolment; and most often the courses bear little evident relationship.

We need to understand the reasons better if we are to make sure the pathways and options are easy to achieve and worth supporting.

In considering these issues we also need to look again at some of the guiding assumptions we have. We need to distinguish between a type of education service and the provider or institution that provides it. The two sets no longer line up: we may be approaching a time when any provider could provide courses from any of the sectors — already some universities provide vocational education courses accredited by the national training framework committee, while some TAFE's provide higher education courses accredited by a partner university.

We also tend to run a fairly outdated public-private split when there are few entirely publicly owned and run institutions left (not even all public schools and TAFE's). The more meaningful distinction is between publicly subsidised (or to use the modish term of the 90s, purchased) and unsubsidised institutions or courses.

- E.g. the taxpayer subsidises the Australian catholic university and Notre dame university (for one campus); while many 'public' institutions provide unsubsidised courses, whether extension courses, continuing education or standard fee paying postgraduate and now undergraduate courses.
- Further study of where the systems are developing along convergent lines, and where differentiation is increasing, would be fruitful

Demand and need

In talking of lifelong learning and near universal tertiary education we presumably think this will involve some increase in the number of people studying at a given point: but how much of an increase?

We need to look at some fairly complex modelling of the different factors to judge the impact of different levels of participation over the next decade or two.

- Beyond 15-20 years it becomes too much of a guessing game and is ultimately pointless because we cannot know the social and political context that will then exist – imagine the predictions of the 1960s for education in the 1990s.

That modelling would need to look at three if not four groups:

- School leavers are the easiest. We have fairly good population estimates while the two main variables are year 12 completion rates and the proportion move onto further education or training;
- Next, mature age students doing their first degree. This group has been a large growth area for the past decade. However, to the extent that this reflects past low levels of school completion, it is possible that the much higher rates we now have now will mean that this group is smaller in the future.

Calculating the possible size of this group will thus not be easy but should be possible.

- It gets more difficult again to estimate, or construct a series of alternatives, of the rate of return to further study of people with degrees and other qualifications.
- We need to explore the size and motivation of this group to estimate the impact of differing levels of return.
- The last and least well considered group is the adult students seeking 'recreation' study driven by social and personal needs not vocational needs.

With analysis done of the likely size of those groups, we will be in a better position to consider just what level of participation, and in what types of courses, is needed and is sustainable.

The provision of higher education

So far I have focussed more on the broader context for higher education, focussing on the demand side. There are also issues for research which focus more on the provision of higher education itself.

Learning and teaching

The nature of learning, and the teaching that supports it, is under scrutiny. We hear a lot about the potential impact of information technology on learning; and the threat to traditional campus-based learning from internet-based providers. The latter is something a QUT research team is about to study further under the guidance of a joint Australian-British steering group on which DETYA, our UK counterpart and us are represented.

Quite apart from that debate, and the research needed to underpin it, is the more fundamental question of how do we know about the quality of learning achieved, whether by traditional or 'flexible' delivery? At

present we rely on some fairly crude quantitative data, which tell us how many people, have emerged from the system and at what rate of progression.

In terms of quality we perhaps place too much – and increasing - reliance on the GCCA course experience questionnaire.

- The recent symposium on the CEQ seems to have done little to improve understanding of it. To the extent that the research base for the CEQ shows a real tie back to teaching quality rather than just reflecting student attitudes, that research is not well appreciated. Now that the government appears to be relying on the CEQ more and more in central assessments of universities' quality and performance, there is clear need to research its capacity to be used in that way, and to re-examine the various comparisons made by means of it.

More work is arguable needed at the front end also. Just as some claim that poor CEQ results are merely the result of attracting and training more critical students, so others claim that universities attracting students with a high TER do not have as hard a row to hoe as those educating the next rung. Clearly, more needs to be understood about the 'value-added' by university education. Perhaps the long mooted but as yet unseen graduate tests are intended to throw light on these murky areas.

But even more broadly, we need research to back up – contest – the fine words we all of us utter about the value of higher education to society at large – the public good - as well as the private good value to graduates and employers.

Another important issue is the relationship of good research to good university teaching. Do teachers of undergraduate courses need to be cutting edge researchers, or is it sufficient for them to be 'scholars'? How does the research culture imbued from having leading researchers in a particular department or faculty percolate to the undergraduate? If the answer is that it doesn't, where lies the comparative advantage of university education for an undergraduate? If the answer is that it must and it does percolate, how can we arrange for all undergraduates to benefit from the percolation? We could usefully see further research on just what is required for effective learning at university – recognising that it is of course likely to vary among courses and at different levels within the degree.

The impact of funding systems

There has been a range of research into funding systems for higher education, with a focus on the options for more market based systems. Some of this has been critical to the development of policy – none more so than the work done in relation to what became HECS. There is still opportunity for further work to consider the impact and implications of some of the issues we are now debating; for example:

- Whether it is equitable for HECS only to be available for students in subsidised places.
- The impact on affordability and access of the various changes to HECS and fees over the past few years.

3. How do we ensure best use and widest collection of data

At present DETYA is the main holder of higher education data, having the detailed statistical returns made by universities and other funded institutions. There are three basic problems with this:

- First, as the funder and direct adviser to the government, the focus of collection, publication and analysis is the needs of the funding system. This is not to deny that DETYA disseminates widely very useful data and supports a range of worthwhile research projects.

But the data is limited to organisations that receive subsidy, and even in those cases the focus is primarily on services subsidised.

- Secondly, the collections relating to the different sectors are maintained and structured separately. We need to consider higher education data along with other education sectors if we are to advance some of the issues the issues I raised earlier.

The vocational education and training sector has something along those lines in the national centre for vocational education and research, although its data on non funded vocational education and training is limited (but growing).

- Finally, there is the question of disinterestedness and mutual trust. Will providers continue to trust purchasers to analyse their data? Will purchasers continue to trust providers to come clean? Will users, researchers, and the wider public, trust either?

The avcc is now considering whether we need a new independent body set up to gather and analyse education data, preferably covering all education sectors to overcome the problem of inconsistent data spread among commonwealth, state and private collections.

The example I am most familiar with is the Australian institute of health and welfare. The AIHW defines data sets and receives data from all health and welfare sources and analyses and publishes that data. It is essentially independent of the particular barrows of state and commonwealth bureaucrats and providers, but sets priorities in consultation with all interested and disinterested parties, through a representative board of management and periodic wider consultative exercises.

If we were to pursue such a body in the education sphere there are a number of questions about what it should do:

- Should it collect statistical data only or broader information?
- Should it simply publish the data, or also analyse them?
- Should it develop indicators of sector-wide quality and performance?
- Should it report on the state of the sector, along the lines of the AIHW's well-received biennial 'Australia's health' for example?

One option for such a body would of course be a special unit within the Australian bureau of statistics. However there are reasonable concerns about its ability to provide the level of service required, and the risk of resources being directed to other tasks. A purpose-built body is likely to be more responsive to users.

I would much appreciate feedback from participants about these ideas, as the AVCC has not yet reached a conclusion on their merits.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me thank you for the opportunity to suggest some areas for research of likely interest to the providers and perhaps the users of higher education.