

**Conference on OPTIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM, Canberra  
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**Panel presentation on Higher Education at the Crossroads: Learning experiences and outcomes**

**Introduction – distinguishing learning from delivery**

The issues identified in the beginning of this section of the Crossroads report are significant and timely:

- ‘a renewed focus on the centrality of learning’, ‘repositioning of learning at the centre of higher education [which] reframes conceptions, priorities and expectations of outcomes’
  - the quality of teaching
  - the need for flexibility in approaches, modes and settings for learning in higher education
- Related to*
- the changing characteristics of the student body associated with changing forms of student involvement in higher education (p. 17).

These are serious issues that deserve attention. What follows is disappointing. Despite the introductory statement about the ‘centrality of learning’, the focus is not learning but ‘learning productivity’, an idea drawn from Johnstone (1992) and defined as getting ‘more learning for the resources invested and paid for by the taxpayer, parent and student’ by getting students through faster – a form of fast education, reducing the student's time on getting the degree, sticking to essentials, studying all the year round etc. That is the focus is on the delivery of education, and doing it efficiently.

This is an important distinction that I would like to elaborate as it explains why in a discussion paper sprinkled with constant references to learning, meaningful discussion of learning and learning quality is absent. And why I suggest the consultative questions are limited in perspective and do not address the complexity of the issues facing HE.

I will elaborate on the distinction by looking at the language to show how a learning frame would produce a different perspective from that of learning productivity. If we take the language of Johnstone and Crossroads we get the language in the left hand column:

| LEARNING PRODUCTIVITY   | LEARNING   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individualised</li> <li>• Self-paced</li> <li>• Mastery</li> <li>• Modular</li> <li>• Time independent</li> <li>• Measurable learning outcomes</li> <li>• Accelerated learning</li> <li>• Packaging</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement</li> <li>• Conversation</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Social &amp; interactive</li> <li>• Connectivity</li> <li>• Situated learning</li> <li>• Reflection</li> <li>• Learning environment</li> </ul> |

Underlying this list in the left hand column is an assumption of knowledge as a fixed entity and learning as the demonstrated mastery of a defined body of knowledge or skills (a 'given body of knowledge' according to Johnstone, 1992). This body of knowledge is to be packaged and delivered to students in chunks or modules which can be aggregated, i.e. the traditional transmission model of filling empty vessels, and of behaviourist training, with the extra benefit of technology and web enhancement. In so far as this model is student-centered the advantage is to do with making the conditions of learning more flexible - the space/time aspects (when and where) - set up to improve access for students of different backgrounds with varying needs, and circumstances. This perspective on learning as an individual activity and as aggregating bits of knowledge according to prespecified outcomes, was under challenge before computers, but unfortunately much of the terminology was picked up by educational technology proponents and so has persisted. I note that this year Phil Candy, who contributed to our understanding of the complexities of independent learning with his outstanding book *Self-direction for Lifelong learning* (1991), as well as his later work on lifelong learning, at a very recent seminar titled his presentation – 'Putting the learning back into e-learning'.

That this recommendation is necessary, is demonstrated by Johnstone and the Crossroads paper. What is missing in their discussions is any recognition of learning as a cognitive and social process, and outcomes which go beyond the mastery of content or codified knowledge. There is one reference to online, experiential, problem-based or collaborative learning, as available methodologies in the tertiary teacher's repertoire (p. 17). And nothing more. But underpinning these methodologies, and increasingly the experience of online learning, is a different view of learning. It leads to a different language, shown in the right hand column, that is missing from Crossroads. From this perspective the learner is an active agent making meaning as they engage with a subject in interaction with others. Successful learning happens best where the learning is situated in contexts which have meaning and relevance to the learner, and there is social support through collaboration and interaction. Knowledge is not 'out there' but is socially constructed and changeable. Hence the need to create productive learning environments.

## **The implications for flexibility and undergraduate education**

Many educators are now concerned to work through the implications of what we know about learning. In the case of flexibility it leads to:

- recognising the tensions in the cost/quality of learning/ access nexus. Addressing this nexus involves tradeoffs. For example more flexibility can come at the cost of social interaction and engagement; so we build in more interactivity and online conversations. But that can cost more, and so on. It is in response to these tensions that some predict a scenario in which FAST cheap education as recommended by Johnstone, with a heavy reliance on online access will be available for those who can't afford quality education, with enriched learning environments for those who can.

A difficulty with this scenario, however, is that independent learning and self organisation skills are prerequisites, not outcomes for individualised/open learning, and least likely to be had by the disadvantaged. Of course many see open/online as best for adult learners, which will include working undergraduates. The for-profit institutions are operating in this arena, and we hear much of time-poor, instrumentalist learners who want a stripped down education to get credentialed. I am looking forward to some hard data on this as the substantial body of research in adult education over the years has produced a rather different profile of adult learners as learners who want quality education, space to follow their own interests, intellectual stimulation and interaction. This has also been my experience as an adult education provider.

Given the complexities of providing appropriate flexibility we can conclude that Question, a1, in Crossroads (p. 20) concerning flexibility is unanswerable, as it all depends on what any institution/course aims to achieve with what resources.

- the implications of what we know about learning at the undergraduate level can lead to more radical outcomes. It is important to stress that the two columns I have presented do not provide a comparison of FAST or flexible education with traditional education. For example, the Boyer Report (of 1998 and mentioned in Crossroads) which is based on current research and thinking about learning is recommending reinventing undergraduate education, and is proposing something much more radical than Johnstone. He is really proposing a speeded up version of what is already in place. More efficient delivery, NOT more effective learning.

The 1998 Boyer Report recognises among other issues the significant shift towards what has been termed 'operationalism' by Barnett (1994), a shift to including in the curriculum more of the knowledge of practice - the 'knowing how', of which an outward manifestation is the current emphasis on generic skills. Unfortunately this manifestation is often restricted to the more trivial aspects of skills out of context, rather than the broader range of life-long learning skills that have been identified by Candy and others (1994) to give both depth and breadth, and teach learning how to learn - the metacognition necessary for self direction - and a sense of the interconnectedness of fields, an awareness of how knowledge is created, and the limitations on that knowledge. Such an approach puts a value on a broad range of activities which can include: internships, work placements and volunteer activity, for fostering the broader learning outcomes which employers seek as set out in paragraph 68 of the Crossroads paper (p. 14):

- 'Employers are looking for people who can respond to change, keep up with rapidly changing technology and show initiative and creativity....need a system that produces graduates who can think critically need and have adaptable skill sets as well as technical expertise... will require significant transformation of approaches to curriculum and pedagogy to stimulate and stretch students '

A focus on learning would challenge both traditional education and teaching, and the FAST approach of Johnstone and others, still hoping that technology will lead to cutting costs. Terrenzini (a noted US researcher ) talks of a 'belief-evidence' disjunction in discussions on undergraduate education in the US about student learning, teaching and organisation. He argues that regardless of what research in many discipline areas now tells us about how students learn, which would demand a radical restructure of how we provide undergraduate education, a paradigm focused on delivery of instruction continues to dominate, and ensure that we continue with traditional arrangements which are not conducive to student learning. It is the focus on education as delivery which prevents us, he states, from following through on the promise to make learning central. The belief/evidence disjunction could explain how the Crossroads paper can both claim to make 'learning' central, and then follow a line of thinking which is contrary to that claim and end up with a series of consultative questions which are driven by how to make instruction efficient, and ensure quality defined with reference to minimum standards and national testing.

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