

A response to *Higher education in modern Australia*

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Introductory comments

I welcome the opportunity to respond to *Higher education in modern Australia*. The following comments are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the university where I am a PhD student.

The first part of this response goes beyond the contents of the discussion paper to address important issues that are mostly absent from *Higher education in modern Australia*. The second part of this response comments on a selection of the questions for discussion specified in *Higher education in modern Australia*.

PART 1: What's missing from the discussion paper

Higher education in modern Australia includes issues of key importance to the higher education sector. The discussion paper deals at length with possible structures of higher education; in other words, the system of the higher education sector is the focus. The paper would have been greatly enriched if it had also discussed the *idea* of a university (Duke, 2004), the issue of what universities, at their core, should be. Once this is determined, structural and systematic decisions can follow.

Within the higher education sector in Australia, there would appear to be a clash of cultures that needs to be acknowledged before reforms proceed. This clash is between conceptions of higher education as an industry (very much the view of the discussion paper) and the idea of higher education as a centre of various forms of knowledge endeavour. I suggest that the latter view is the appropriate one which, in the long run, will benefit higher education more than shorter-term conceptions of higher education as an industry.

One idea of higher education: As an 'industry'

The idea of higher education presented in the discussion paper is that it is an industry (continuing the work of the West review, 1998, in this regard) and that universities are money-making enterprises. The presentation of this idea is not unexpected given that

‘the most common modern Australian Idea of a University...is imposed corporatist managerialism’ (Duke, 2004, p. 310).

Higher education in modern Australia emphasizes the economic function of universities as serving the national economy through global competitiveness. This conceptualization

suggests particular values: competitiveness, efficiency and profitability. Worryingly, however, explicit discussion of values is absent from *Higher education in modern Australia*. I would have welcomed explicit discussion of values relevant to knowledge-based activities, especially those of intellectual rigour and integrity.

Another idea of higher education and universities: As a centre of learning

The idea of 'higher education as 'industry'', though entrenched, needs to be questioned. Universities need to be acknowledged first and foremost, as places of learning (through their research and teaching). Universities should be concerned with the disinterested pursuit, critique, dissemination, and creation of knowledge. They need to become knowledge leaders in modern Australian society. This view does not need to be in conflict with profitability but it does need to be foundational.

Values

If the word 'university' is to signify institutions dedicated to different forms of excellent knowledge work and if the word itself is to warrant continued protection, then universities need an identity and sense of self steeped in academic values rather than those of the marketplace, business community or global economy.

I suggest that, instead of business values, universities embrace and practise the values of intellectual rigour and integrity, moral courage, autonomy, altruism and collegiality. Some or all of these values might currently be seen implicitly as important in universities. This is not enough; they need to be explicitly expressed and practised.

The suggestion that universities be driven by values is not necessarily incompatible with an efficient or competitive higher education sector. For instance, if universities are known to exercise high levels of robustness and integrity in their research, as has traditionally been the case, the resulting enhancement to reputation will be an attraction for industry to partner with such universities to undertake research.

The position of academics

The adoption of the proposed values would impact on the role of academics. Within universities, academics are key players. This remains so, despite reports of more recent shifts of influence to administrative staff.

A two-tiered level of academic employment (those who are casuals and those who are tenure-track) is discussed in the paper (p. 63). This two-tiered system has been developing within Australian universities for the past few years (Kimber, 2003). Such a two-tiered system is unlikely to address the brain drain or the problems of the ageing academic population, discussed in the paper. Retention and attraction of academic staff pose serious challenges to the university sector. Reducing tenure opportunities and keeping casuals in uncertain work conditions is not likely to attract academic staff. The opposite might have some positive effect.

While increased tenure opportunities and an accompanying reduction of casualisation are important, the government needs to go further and to actively support universities in

formally conceptualizing the academic occupation as one controlled by its own members rather than by administrative staff and/or business interests. Academics are required to be appropriately formally qualified through PhDs (for their discipline knowledge and research expertise) and, increasingly, through formal teaching qualifications (so that they can provide excellent learning opportunities for their very diverse students). More and more, they are expected to be involved in their on-going professional development. Given these levels of qualifications and expertise, it seems both logical and just that academics should be the ones to make academic decisions, rather than these often being in the hands of non-academics.

For universities to be robust places of intellectual endeavour, academics need to function not only within the university but also as public intellectuals. Twenty years ago, the federal minister for education said:

‘We do not want a higher education system that fails to analyse and, where necessary, criticise the society in which it operates’ (Dawkins, 1988, p 5-7 in Duke, 2004, p. 301).

The role of public intellectual is one that matters to academics as evidenced by the establishment of an Association for the Public University, aimed at protecting the rights of academics to fulfill their role as public intellectuals (Maslen, 1999 in Duke 2004). The infrequency of public comment by academics has been lamented by a former Labour minister (Jones, 1999 in Duke 2004).

Rather than being amateur entrepreneurs attending advertising events to drum up enrolments for their institutions, academics should spend their time engaging with the public through public commentary on issues of importance. They need to work in an environment where they can perform their duties as public intellectuals with confidence, unafraid of censure from their universities, secure in the knowledge that their role as public intellectuals is protected by the enacted values of intellectual rigour and integrity.

If universities are supported by government in conceptualizing themselves as centres of knowledge pursuit, creation, critique and dissemination and if academics enjoy appropriate work conditions that allow them to be thinkers, the result might well be a confident community of scholars engaged in vibrant intellectual conversation not only within academia but within local, national and international communities. Such communities would appear to cohere with comments in the discussion paper about a ‘third stream’/community engagement factor.

PART 2: Responses to a selection of the discussion questions

Question for discussion 1

How adequate is the statement of functions and characteristics of higher education in modern Australia?

As outlined in Part 1 of this response, *Higher education in modern Australia* places an excessive focus on the economic functions of higher education. More emphasis needs to be given to the intellectual role of universities, to their essential knowledge-based functions. The discussion paper asserts that ‘the traditional role’ of higher education remains ‘critical and relevant’ (p. 1). However, the traditional role of universities has not been the over-riding pursuit of profit or economic competitiveness. The remainder of *Higher education in modern Australia* emphasises the conceptualization of higher education as an ‘industry’. The repeated use of the word ‘industry’ consistently paints higher education in money terms, rather than in intellectual ones.

Therefore, the statement of functions and characteristics of higher education in modern Australia is inadequate.

Question for discussion 2

Are there impediments to the higher education sector being able to innovate in the development of courses and programs? What are these impediments and how could they be removed?

The higher education sector has the capacity for curricular innovation. What it lacks is sufficient time to be innovative.

Externally imposed and time-consuming audit systems focus on the visibles, the easy-to-measure ‘achievements’ of universities. They use time that could be spent in genuine academic pursuits and program innovation. If there is a need for such audit measures, then these need to be as streamlined as possible. If universities use (as many of them already do) a team approach which includes learning designers alongside academic content experts to innovate re their curriculum, this should lead to sharper internal processes as long as the appropriate oversight committees have adequate time allocations for these responsibilities. Academic decisions about programs need to be made by academics.

Question for discussion 7

What is the relevance and applicability of the findings and approaches proposed in the United Kingdom paper, *Higher Education at Work*, for increasing skills levels in the workforce to Australia?

Three issues of concern are identified in *Higher Education at Work*.

1. Completion of the suggested Foundation Degrees might delay students’ progress in attaining the degree they’re really interested in.
2. The use of an employer-led board to advise Ministers prompts the question: What is the role of academics in providing advice and guidance? One would expect opposition if it were proposed that higher education should drive the business sector and make key decisions on its behalf. Why should the opposite be

proposed? It would be timely to examine why academics' expertise is apparently treated so dismissively.

3. Co-funding arrangements of higher education with employers might sound attractive. It is fraught with danger unless higher education retains the 'casting vote'. It is not appropriate for the higher education sector to cede its knowledge and authority to business. Australia needs a confident higher education sector **led** by academics. The practice of business partnering with universities has become entrenched. Though some input is benign, for instance the work of the Business and Higher Education Round Table (Duke, 2004), the practice itself needs to be questioned. A major danger of over-engaging with business research interests may well be a diminishing of research activity driven by curiosity rather than by an anticipated dollar pay-off.

Therefore, one would think very carefully indeed before applying the suggestions of the United Kingdom paper, 'Higher Education at Work' to the Australian context.

Question for discussion 13

How can the quality of learning outcomes in Australian higher education be measured more effectively?

Two assumptions underlie this question: that learning outcomes can be measured and that they should be measured. Not all learning outcomes can be measured and we need to be sufficiently sophisticated in our understanding of pedagogy to accept this.

Only the most uncomplicated and straightforward learning outcomes can be measured easily. More subtle and complex outcomes may not be evident at all in the immediate term. Even in the longer term, they may be impacted by a multiplicity of other influences.

Therefore, in the first instance, one would distinguish between learning outcomes that lend themselves to measurement and those that do not.

Question for discussion 19

By what mechanism should research activities in Australian universities be supported?

The actual mechanisms are less important than the values and ethical practices underpinning all research activities. The key role of values for universities (discussed in Part 1 above) includes research values.

If business is to contribute to research initiatives in Australian universities, such activity needs to be robustly underpinned by a strong code of research practice including ethical codes that go well beyond issues of participant consent. Such ethical understandings would include the integrity of methodology and of the transparency of dissemination of findings, favourable or not to any business research partners.

Question for discussion 21

Do you believe there is a place in Australia's higher education system for universities that are predominantly 'teaching only' universities? If so, why?

If institutions of higher education teach and do not undertake research, they need to be called by some title other than 'university'. Such institutions could well fulfill vital roles. However, they should not be known as 'universities' because universities not only disseminate knowledge; they also pursue and create it, i.e. they engage in research. A better arrangement would be to have, within universities, a model whereby academics teach for say two years, then do research for two years in a rotating cycle of teaching/research engagement.

Question for discussion 22

Are there any unintended consequences of the current approach to the internationalization of higher education in Australia?

In order to make up shortfalls in government spending on higher education in recent years (as detailed in the discussion paper), Australian universities have competed with one another for the lucrative international student market.

In order to attract more students, quite low IELTS scores are accepted for non-native speakers of English. One would expect these low entry scores to lead to high failure rates among international students. Anecdotally and surprisingly, this does not appear to be the case. Possibly, research figures of which I am currently unaware might suggest otherwise? As noted in *Higher education in modern Australia*, some comment suggests that preferential treatment is given to international students in the marking of their assessments. A related outcome appears to be a drop in academic standards. A further concern relates to consistent reports of plagiarism (though this is not limited to international students). Some international students require considerable support from academics. This results in greater workloads and increased stress for academics. One would expect there to be some impact on the quality of the learning experience for domestic students who share classes with international students, some of whom may be struggling to understand the language of delivery.

References

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