

Submission to Denise Bradley Review of Higher Education, by Richard A. DeAngelis, Flinders University
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The current review exercise is very ambiguous,; it is almost Jekyll and Hyde in so far as one can rationally believe in either of two opposing scenarios. Either this is a serious, cautious attempt to remodel the higher education sector in a permanently reformed way, with proper funding and regulation, or the review is an attempt to buy time, buy off university discontent, and hope for a gimmick to fix up the system at no great cost. Probably the government does not know itself which road it is willing and able to take, [with so little spare cash given inflationary pressures and a downturn in the economy and other issues, such as climate change and industrial relations]. We will only know which way things are going when they are decided, too late, next year. At a briefing from Flinders managers recently, some straws in the wind were blowing-- in both directions. The first draft of the Bradley report was also open to divergent interpretations. On the one hand, the whole range of traditional complaints and problems has been widely acknowledged. On the other hand, even the previous government also acknowledged the problems but did nothing to alleviate them and the Dawkins precedent is not hopeful either, when Labor was last at a similar watershed. Furthermore, no mention has been made, by Rudd or Gillard, about guaranteeing a return to indexation, or to reestablishing a buffer body, or promising a funding increase needed to offset the deterioration in staff-student ratios, etc. Most worrisome to me was the remark by DVC academic that the review and the government wanted evidence based submissions showing actual damage from underfunding and not just anecdotal or whingeing about poverty, which they are fully aware of.

That is worrisome because government neglect has meant that there is no such evidence to appeal to directly. The stats were never collected on the decline in quality in students, learning, outcomes, research, teaching, administration, etc. All we have are indirect indicators and quantitative but incomplete stats that can always be discounted. And coal face evidence by practitioners is already discounted as whingeing, and anecdotal. So we cannot win.

Any reasonable analysis would start with the CTEC review of 1985/86 and an appreciation of the strengths of the old system, and then add a prima facie case that declining funding and excessive managerialism and tinkering would reasonably be expected to impact on quality. All the anecdotal evidence suggests this: from shorter and larger tutorials, to declining attendance at lectures, to increases in plagiarism and declines in minimum standards of English, to the excessive increase in rules and regulations and silly performance indicators. But there is no proof as such. We used to be attractive to foreign staff; no longer and not even competitive in many fields. Will the review listen? Does the review even have the proper background, with no sandstone or gumtree representatives? We will see.

The worst case scenario is that the government is hoping for a set of structural reforms (new networks or mergers, with TAFE and public-private consortia? ; and gimmicks for funding (e.g. separating teaching and research funding, quasi markets, lifelong learning vouchers, etc.) to avoid simply having to fund properly and trust the universities autonomously to get on with it. It is sad that we cannot exclude another West or Cross roads exercise. Hopes have been raised.

Hopefully not in vain.

My hopes/recommendations for a better, even best case scenario:

1. Whatever else happens, the system needs some flexibility and stability. It needs to be able to plan more than a year or two ahead. The old system, pre Dawkins, had those elements with a buffer body of experts to regulate and collect data and analyze for triennium submissions. We should return to such a body to do regulation, to distribute funding by formula, to avoid politisation and periodic mania by ministers, to collect and analyze data on the system, comparatively and transparently, to maintain public private minima and coordination/accreditation and fair boundaries, to encourage rational cooperation, etc. So there needs to be a new CTEC like body as prerequisite for everything else, an ARC like body for items other than research. The system can be diverse in size, mission, structure, levels, etc. and should be. But it needs an overall supervisory body.

2. There needs to be agreement on the scope of the sector and minimal definitions of what is required of each type of activity and institutions: what is a university? , what is a higher education institutions? what can stakeholders call themselves and their activities in the market place? what minimal grading systems will be standard and what curricula units (e.g. the Bologna process) for degrees at various levels? These are things that only a central authority can ensure are uniform and fair across the system; they should not be left to the market initiatives of players, as content can and should be.

2. There needs to be a diverse but adequate funding system, including some reasonable guarantees of indexation, some capital/maintenance minima for old campus buildings and some growth funding for newer ones; there also needs to be some national system, using demographic data, to plan outlines of the personal need of the system as a whole given the looming baby boomer departure and the need for new blood, from inside and outside the system. A contract system would be ok but only if there is transparency about the types of institutions, the rules, the missions, etc. and how they are normally funded. Also I can see no justification, especially with fewer school leavers, for any unmet student demand at all, similar to USA state based entry, or Germany or France. Why not give everyone at least a year's chance to prove themselves if they graduate highschool or equivalent?

4. I would prefer there to be an explicit introduction of USA style liberal arts college, called something different I expect in Australia, but based on intense and quality general education principles, probably over 4 years for a BA, to accommodate a diverse student body, to guarantee both vocational and personal/liberal arts objectives, and to separate general knowledge from professional education, on the Melbourne model perhaps (cf. Harvard system but it is widespread in USA). You cannot have a high quality but mass based and diverse system without some curriculum that is based on a cross-disciplinary common core, without excess narrowness and specialisations.

5. I also think that the USA model on governance has promise in so far as the old Oxbridge style of collegiality is probably dead forever, from suicide as much as murder from the outside, even in the UK, but the wholly managerial model we have adopted is unsuited and unsuitable, and gives counterproductive results (especially in alienation between managers and staff). The US model, at least as I knew it in both public and private bodies in the USA (Chicago, Harvard, Un of Calif), is like

the US presidential system in so far as it has strong checks and balances. The managers are professionals at administration, even if the higher levels of deans and VC/Presidents have academic credentials and backgrounds usually. But they are off set by strong Academic Senates and union/professional academic associations that cannot be ignored. The current system in Australia gives the managers too much power and privileges and salaries compared to academic and non-academic staff, but the latter can and do sabotage, if only by inaction, what managers want if they go too far, as they are likely to do. The pursuit of ever smaller councils on the business model with strong executive hierarchies is a recipe for disaster in the absence of wide consultation and consensus, which is currently lacking.

6. 6. There should be more generous and realistic help to students, with higher and reasonable Austudy schemes, lower and fixed HECS, return of student services properly funded and a brake on excess student earnings outside study if at all possible. It would be nice if there could be more student life and even dormitories so that students could be more mobile, travel interstate and abroad more and enjoy their university/higher education experience as much as US kids do. Perhaps the West committee's life long learning accounts could be used in this respect and made generous and open to all for equity reasons.

7. There should be a rethink if not abolition of the EB arrangements in universities which cannot work, without negative consequences. There could even be a return to the tribunal arrangements which used to exist and which continue to exist for judges and politicians (using flowons and linkages as well as/or instead of productivity as we must. EB based on productivity has only meant staff cuts and cuts in quality, slow death to university standards. But given how good the system was to start with, it will take a long time to achieve Italian or Nigerian standards of scandalous lack of quality. But we will get there eventually if the present bleeding continues. After the baby boomer wave of retirements, the system could collapse as institutional memory is lost and the young juniors are swamped; unless you think that an online www-based system can cope??? which it hasn't anywhere else.

8. Finally and most controversially, I would love to see the total rethink of research management efforts, away from the utopian and counterproductive effort to create a centrally administered system, herding butterflies I have seen it referred to, based on cost effectiveness and national priorities, and unworkable and unfair performance indicators. The abolition of the RQF is ambiguous in this light given that while flawed it at least did have a qualitative, peer review element. The new ERA is likely to try to have an impossible consensus on what are prestigious and valuable journals and publishers, across all fields, into which only reliable quantitative data can be fed on publications (which are valid and meaningful), avoiding the problems, hassles and cost of a proper research evaluation system. I doubt such a system can be constructed at all, without major anomalies or too high a cost. The best systems for basic research of high quality involve competition, freedom, peer review and emulation, and trusting those who are capable and well chosen, and probably not everyone in the system. But managing the best researchers is impossible or counterproductive, except in small, voluntary units or government applied research institutes like CSIRO or the French CNRS. But in university research, quality cannot be managed and quantitatively assessed with any accuracy (cf. Bourke studies of performance reviews). We need to keep a teaching research nexus for most, but allow some high quality teaching specialisations as in US liberal arts colleges (using PhD and scholarly activity if not "research") measures), and allow some

specialised research (basic, applied, cutting edge, etc) institutes, post, etc. who can be managed, but not a one size fits all system for the all universities.

I have no objection to league tables provided they are based on reliable and valid data and transparent and open to objections. But they are useless for students, and not helpful to government funding bodies unless they are based on real units of research, which are smaller than whole institutions. Also there needs to be better funding of infrastructure, assumed to be available, and equal treatment of all types of scholarly research activities, especially time. It would also be helpful if the system clarified the question of whether or not there is still any implied research time being already funded in general grants to universities right now; my understanding is that the relative funding model essentially agreed twenty years ago that the notional one third funding for research had been leaked and clawback from the sandstones and gumtrees to a level similar to the ex CAEs and then there was left a quantum, which varied, but roughly less than 10% of total funding for "research". So most of us have been employed to do in term time at least only teaching, scholarly activity and administration/outreach. Research time has been at our own expense and in vacations. If that is not true, on what basis are we funded for research time. And given that our salaries overall have declined so substantially absolutely and relatively to other comparable professions, who is funding research time for people without grants?