

NATIONAL POLICY-MAKING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

National Policy-making for Higher Education

Nearly all higher education institutions in Australia, the universities and colleges of advanced education, are public institutions established by governments. Most of them were established by State governments, but all are almost entirely supported by the Commonwealth Government. As Commonwealth involvement has increased, so has the extent of national-level policy formation. Universities were the first educational sector for which national-level policies were regularly and systematically formulated. To a lesser extent, national policies have subsequently been formulated for advanced education, technical and further education, and school-level education. Since governments have the legislative and financial powers over higher education, they have dominated policy-making at the macro levels, and this paper will be largely devoted to an examination of this dominance.

However, before examining in detail the relation between government and the higher education system it is important to place this relationship in a broader context since policy formation is not simply determined by the power relationship and the interaction between these parties. The relationship between governments and higher education, which is quite complex in itself, exists within a complex political environment. Thus, in addition to the two levels of government and the range of institutions with different degrees of autonomy, there are many other influences and constraints operating on the relationship in multiple ways and at multiple levels. Harman provides a useful overview of the political environment for higher education.¹ He identifies five categories of influence: higher education interests (the student, teaching staff, and administrator organisations), professional groups, community groups (for example: church, minority, regional organisations), business and labour groups, and governments. These interest groups operate at all levels from the campus level where some are represented on institutional governing bodies, to the national level where pressure is generally directed towards governments. This national-level situation is a consequence of the use by the Commonwealth Government of its financial power, and to a lesser extent, the use by the States of their legislative power, to control higher education. The sources of influence on government and the ways in which influence is exerted are

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a worthwhile subject for study, but here the examination will be focused on the relationship between governments and higher education and the effects this has had on policy-making.

A second preliminary point relates to the meaning of national policy. As a consequence of the ways in which the higher education system and the policy-making processes have developed, much of the discussion must be directed to the policy-making role of the Commonwealth and its agencies. Also, the actions of the Commonwealth have tended to indicate, despite some rhetoric to the contrary, that it has come to regard 'Commonwealth' and 'national' as synonymous when dealing with higher education policy. Burn and Karmel² and Neal³ have recognised the distinction: 'Commonwealth' policies are those of the Commonwealth Government, and 'national' policies are those relating to national considerations and the 'national interest'. Neal argues that national policies are best developed by a co-operative effort between the Commonwealth and the States. The Australian Education Council and the Australian Universities Commission in the early 1960s are examples of mechanisms which have produced some national policies in this sense, demonstrating that alternatives to the current trend of Commonwealth dominance are possible. Neal, as a proponent of 'States rights', regards Commonwealth dominance as dysfunctional, and makes a strong attack on the Commonwealth's assumption that responsibility for funding carries with it the sole rights to exercise or to delegate the decision-making powers relating to the use of the funds. Whether the Commonwealth's activities are seen as desirable or undesirable, it can be seen that, as with many other issues in Australian education, an examination of the role of governments in higher education policy-making must be undertaken within the context of Commonwealth-State relationships.

The Division of Powers

The division of powers between the Commonwealth and the States, compounded by the inconsistent delegation of powers from the State governments to the three types of educational institution, has been the major determinant of the present pattern of Australian higher education and the present arrangements for national-level policy-making. At the time of federation, the States retained their legislative powers over education and the constitution does not grant the Commonwealth specific legislative powers with respect to education except in its own territories and for the provision of benefits to students.

However, as a result of the Commonwealth's extensive use of Section 96 grants to finance higher education the effective power of the States has been gradually reduced by the growing financial power of the Commonwealth. This has led to the paradox of ostensibly State institutions of higher education being almost entirely federally supported.

The basic distribution of powers has been further complicated by the inconsistent delegation of powers from the State governments to the higher education institutions, so that the two dimensional problem of Commonwealth-State relationships becomes a three dimensional interplay of forces at Commonwealth, State and institutional levels. In theory, the States have delegated certain powers to the institutions within each of the sectors. In brief, the pattern is as follows: universities are corporate bodies governed by councils charged with their entire control and management, while colleges of advanced education have similar autonomy in some respects, but in others are subject to the State Minister for Education and the relevant State co-ordinating body. This relatively small difference between the two higher education sectors has given rise to a number of co-ordination problems, but with the addition of a third sector, technical and further education (TAFE), such problems have been greatly multiplied since TAFE institutions are not constituted independently of the central State authority (a separate TAFE department or branch of the education department) which is the direct responsibility of the State Minister for Education. In practice, the situation is even more complicated since, in addition to the Commonwealth's use of its financial power to negate the statutory powers of institutions, the basic delegations of powers are being increasingly infringed by the powers granted to State co-ordinating bodies. For example, despite acknowledgement of the special role of universities and their consequent need for a degree of autonomy, which has been given legislative substance in the university acts of incorporation, the State co-ordinating bodies (following the lead of the Commonwealth) have increasingly sought to gain control over the universities in order to incorporate university development within comprehensive State plans for tertiary education. Such State and Commonwealth co-ordination may be regarded as highly desirable, but such a belief should not obscure the potential dangers of the rather dubious mechanisms adopted to seek this goal. Perpetuating a basically unsound structure by additions which do not reduce the overall inconsistencies and which are not acceptable to all the parties involved appears to be more likely to increase problems than to solve them.

The unbalanced and unco-ordinated development which has taken place over the last twenty years is largely an outcome of the inconsistent division of powers. Lindsay and O'Byrne have argued that given

the existing distribution of powers, there is no one participant, or combination of the participants in tertiary education, which has the management control of the national system and that consequently, the direction of events is determined not by planning but by the unmanageable interplay of forces at the national, State and institutional levels.⁴ The Commonwealth, the States and the institutions all exercise their powers to influence the development of the system. They have pursued different and sometimes conflicting objectives without any of them being able to achieve continued dominance in policy formation. Hence, development has taken place as the outcome of compromises and bargains, and so has been erratic, fragmentary and often unrelated to educational objectives. In recent years the Commonwealth has attempted to gain a dominant position through more direct use of its financial power. Whether this centralisation of power by the Commonwealth will provide an effective solution to these problems remains to be seen. Given the Commonwealth's past approach to planning, and the State and institutional reactions, it would be difficult to be optimistic. The inconsistent distribution of power and the piecemeal, unco-ordinated system which has resulted from it provide the context in which the roles of governments and their agencies in the policy-making process must be examined.

Commonwealth Committees of Enquiry

The growth in the Commonwealth's involvement in higher education has coincided with a unique period of change and development. Commonwealth committees of enquiry have been instrumental in establishing the framework in which the changes occurred. The main role of the committees has been to provide the means for, and to legitimate, the education system's accommodation to changes in the external social, political and economic forces. These forces and their implications for education have not remained constant and so each committee of enquiry has been faced with a different situation although basically the same task: the adaptation of the higher education system to contemporary social, political and economic forces. At the time of the Murray and Martin Committees, economic growth, demographic pressures, and societal and individual aspirations, favoured an expansion of educational provision, while at the time of the Williams Committee, economic stagnation, reduced demographic pressure, and a reaction to education's increased share of gross domestic product, favoured a stable or declining level of educational provision.

The committees of enquiry have also played an important part in establishing the Commonwealth's control of higher education. They have fostered the Commonwealth's dominance and have also attempted to legitimate the Commonwealth's involvement in the absence of any specific legislative powers. While the Commonwealth's financial dominance and hence

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control in higher education have been established, the attempts to legitimate this increased power have been less successful. The Commonwealth's increased financial role has been readily accepted as inevitable by the States, but they have not so readily relinquished their powers of policy formation and administration, and in response to the Commonwealth's accumulation and exercise of power through its statutory education commissions the States have established their own planning and co-ordinating authorities.

The importance of the legitimization role may be seen most clearly in relation to the Murray Committee. The specification of university needs and the basis for Commonwealth involvement had already been largely determined by the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee Report in 1952 on 'The Crisis in the Finance and Development of Australian Universities' and by the Mills Committee in 1950. Also, the embryonic mechanism of the Universities Commission was already in existence following the Second World War. Hence, the major role of the Murray Committee was to ensure that the greatly increased Commonwealth participation necessary for the upgrading and expansion of university education would be seen to be desirable, appropriate, and in accord with due process.

The next major committee, chaired by Martin, was less concerned with legitimating the Commonwealth's involvement in higher education than with advocating and legitimating major changes in the direction and structure of Australian higher education. The establishment of the colleges of advanced education (CAEs) was one of the most important policy decisions in Australian education. In retrospect it appears to have been a mistake. Its significance was that it reaffirmed our adherence to British educational tradition with its relatively narrow and elite approach to universities, rather than, for example, re-orienting us towards the model provided by the more comprehensive university and college system in the United States which caters for a wide range of student abilities and fields of study. The decision encouraged the perpetuation of the belief that liberal and vocational education can be separated, and resulted in the establishment of a binary system of two kinds of higher education institution. This approach not only had no sound educational basis but also ignored the realities of the nature and purpose of the current university courses. In an early comment on the Martin Report, Partridge condemned the failure of the Martin Committee 'to argue the fundamental education theory, the central principles it purports to be following in the proposals it makes concerning the future role of universities and the nature and functions of the new colleges'.⁵ A good deal has since been written to clarify or defend the supposed distinctions between universities and CAEs, but the fundamental problem remains that

both types of institutions offer high-level vocationally oriented courses with the allocation of fields of study to each being largely determined by the prestige of the fields and traditional practices. Lindsay argues that the false distinction between the institutional types in terms of their vocational orientation derives from the long British and Australian tradition of assigning liberal education a high status and vocational education a low status which led to the erroneous pairing of the former with the high status universities and with the latter with the lower status colleges.⁶ Whatever its derivation, the absence of a clearly differentiated set of purposes for the CAEs contributed significantly to the co-ordination problems of the 1970s.

It is too early yet to assess the significance for educational policy-making of the most recent major committee of enquiry chaired by Williams,⁷ but the Commonwealth Government's initial response does not encourage the belief that the specific recommendations made by the Committee will be pursued vigorously. In addition, the Williams Committee suffered the double misfortune of being given terms of reference which excluded a close examination of the central problems of co-ordination and the division of powers while forcing it to concentrate on a series of labour market problems which cannot be solved by changes in educational policy. The terms of reference of the Williams Committee provide a good example of the limitations of a temporary committee of enquiry. While such committees can be made sensitive to pressures from outside the educational system, they lack the long-term perspective of permanent educational commissions and are highly susceptible to pressures favouring an over-emphasis on the incumbent government's immediate political objectives to the neglect of the long-term educational needs of society.

Commonwealth Government Commissions

At least partly as a consequence of the lack of direct legislative powers with respect to education the Commonwealth has often operated through a statutory authority created to determine needs for a particular area of education and to make recommendations about the allocation of funds. The pattern for federal commissions was established following the Murray Report when the Commonwealth Government restructured the Australian Universities Commission as a semi-autonomous body and assigned to it the objective of promoting 'the balanced development of universities so that their resources may be used to the greatest possible advantage of Australia'.⁸ Smart has pictured the general pattern of Commonwealth entry as follows:

Following sustained pressures and demands on the federal government for more systematic financial assistance and an inquiry into the needs of the sector in question, the govern-

ment would appoint a committee, chaired by an eminent educationalist, to prepare a report recommending a course of action to the government. Such recommendations usually resulted in the establishment of a permanent Commonwealth education commission for that sector, to advise the federal government on national policy guidelines and appropriate levels of triennial financial assistance.⁹

This procedure was adopted following the Murray Report, the Martin Report, the Karmel Report, and the Kangan Report.

As the Universities Commission operated for the longest time and was the trendsetter, it is useful to examine its role in some detail. The immediate impact of government policy and the new commission's operations was the improved financial situation of the universities. The level of resources per student continued to improve until 1968, after which the level started to decline.¹⁰ In addition to the expansion of the university system and the improvements in quality, there were some changes in emphasis such as a reduction in courses below degree standard and increases in postgraduate study and research.

One of the important longer-term impacts of the Commission was on the direction of university development, although during its existence the Australian Universities Commission did not achieve a better definition of its objectives, or the formulation of any overall policy on university development. Indeed, it appears that the Commission made little attempt to do so. Williams drew attention to this surprising situation: 'In none of its reports does the AUC give an explicit account of what it means by balanced development'.¹¹ Williams goes on to examine the differences in participation rates among the States and the Commission's rather naive, and unfulfilled, belief that differences would be reduced in the absence of any policies designed to achieve that result. Lindsay and O'Byrne also examined this issue and concluded that even if the criteria for judging balance were to be determined, the distribution of powers would make it extremely difficult to implement any overall policy.¹² They suggested that the Commission may have recognised that, taking into account university autonomy and the different State policies and priorities, and later, the lack of co-ordination among the tertiary sectors, it was impossible to pursue effectively balanced and co-ordinated development. The Commission had gone some way to expressing this view in its Fifth Report: 'the differences in approach by the States could make difficult the statutory duty of the Commission to promote the balanced growth of the Australian universities'.¹³

Nevertheless, the concept of 'balanced development' was subsequently included in the objectives of the Commission on Advanced Education, and finally as 'balanced and co-ordinated development' in those

of the Tertiary Education Commission. While these bodies occasionally discussed 'balanced development' either across the States, across the tertiary education sectors, or across the levels and fields of study, there has been no explicit discussion of what mix on any of these dimensions would constitute a desirable 'balance' and of what policies the Commission is pursuing to achieve the desired result. For example, one dimension of balance, the question of differences in participation across the States, is discussed in Volume 1 in the 1981 Report.¹⁴ The TEC concluded that, as a consequence of the differing State needs and characteristics, there is no reason to argue that participation rates should be the same for all States. However, the Commission does not present evidence that any of the States are currently in balance in relation to an analysis of the specific needs and characteristics. If this were the case, the differences in the State participation rates reported by the Commission for 1979 (for example, the NSW rates are 4.9 per cent for universities and 3.4 per cent for colleges of advanced education, while the rates for Western Australia are 3.8 per cent and 6.8 per cent respectively), could be explained in relation to the labour market, demographic, schooling, or other social patterns of each State.¹⁵ In the absence of any notion and evidence of balance in relation to individual State requirements or to across-State relativities, it appears that the differences are more indicative of the Commission's inability to promote balanced and co-ordinated development than of differences in State needs.

The Tertiary Education Commission was also charged in 1977 with promoting diversity and similar arguments may be put in relation to this objective. It is remarkable that in 1979 the Commission reiterated the Government view put to Parliament by Senator Carrick in 1977 that it is important that the 'essentially distinct and authentic characteristics of the three various types of tertiary institutions should be preserved and developed',¹⁶ while over the period, government and Commission policies had been largely directed towards rationalization in ways which produce a more standardized and homogeneous system. Arguments for special needs and special cases have not been noticeably effective in prevailing against the drive for simplicity and uniformity. Substantial differences still exist in the way the Commission relates to each of the institutional types, but an emerging trend towards standardization and uniformity is apparent. Indeed, despite the heterogeneity evident in the wide range of institutional sizes, responsibilities and statutory provisions, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission will almost inevitably be forced, in the absence of operational objectives and policies for each sector, to operate through bureaucratic co-ordination; that is, through the determination and application of consistent rules across entire sectors and, in some cases, across the entire tertiary system.¹⁷

Some time ago Hughes argued that centralization inevitably means uniformity as opposed to diversity and the adoption of standard approaches instead of the freedom to experiment.¹⁸ More recently Neal warned of the increasing degree of centralization: 'there is ample evidence to support the view that centralism is increasing despite all the protestations that it is not, and despite some active efforts being made by the Tertiary Education Commission in particular to devolve authority on certain matters'.¹⁹ Examples of the spread of uniformity following centralization can be seen at the State level as well as the Commonwealth. Parry examines the increasing similarities in the relationships between the two types of higher education institutions and the State co-ordinating bodies resulting from the decline in control over CAEs and the increasing control over universities.²⁰

Initially, each of the separate tertiary commissions developed quite different relationships with their institutions. Despite the provision for separate statutory councils for each sector, the creation of the Tertiary Education Commission has inevitably led to greater centralization and standardization; a trend which has been reinforced by the pressures for tighter co-ordination and control. An examination of the evolution of the commission-institution relationship reveals considerable change, especially in the university sector where a separate commission operated for the longest period with the most autonomous institutions. In its first report the Australian Universities Commission stated that it 'works within a framework of university governments, State governments and the Commonwealth Government, and its constant concern is to preserve the autonomy of the university and to avoid any infringement of State rights'.²¹ Differing views have been expressed about the extent to which university autonomy has been reduced in practice. Williams provides a detailed analysis of the changing relationship between the Commission and the universities, concluding that, on balance, the Commission's operation had not reduced university autonomy.²² The Williams Report argues that this is a consequence of the Commission's respect for traditional university autonomy, the acceptance by Australian universities of the need for national plans, and the close working relationship between the universities and the Commission.²³ Contrary views, however, were expressed with Philp's claim that the Commonwealth was 'calling the tune, and the universities are dancing to it'²⁴ and by Hughes:

*Autonomy of institutions, certainly at tertiary level, is highly desirable, in fact essential and should be maintained and even strengthened. Every action and intrusion of the Commonwealth Government in these fields has militated against this principle and is gradually reducing the universities to puppets. This should be resisted to the full.*²⁵

Derham also supports this interpretation of the effects of the Commonwealth's accumulation of power.²⁶ Thus, it appears that there have been considerable changes in the way universities are viewed. Increasingly, they have been seen as agencies of governments, to be co-ordinated, initially within a university system and more recently, within the tertiary education system.

The establishment of the Commission on Advanced Education involved the development of a new type of commission-institution relationship. The much larger number of institutions, the different administrative traditions, and the different purposes and needs, meant that this commission had to adopt an approach different from that of the Universities Commission. The Commission on Advanced Education faced the more difficult task: dealing with a large number of colleges of advanced education, about which the States also had strong views. From the time of the Martin Report, the Commonwealth's plans for advanced education have been frustrated because of the quite different institutional and State views about the desired direction for development. This commission-institution relationship also changed over time as the Commission tried to deal with the rapid, and in its view sometimes undesirable, changes in the character of the institutions. Major changes occurred with the incorporation of teachers colleges into the sector and with the takeover of funding by Commonwealth in 1974 when, as a result of the removal of financial responsibilities, some States revised their policies on advanced education.

Although the role of the Commonwealth commissions has changed continuously with the gradual centralization of power, the single most important change in the Commission's role took place in 1976 when the Commonwealth changed fundamentally the nature of its own relationship with the Commission by converting its planning approach from an enrolment-driven process to a funds-driven process. Whereas government policy prior to 1975 was to fund according to the advice of the Commission regarding the needs of the tertiary sectors, with the needs being largely determined by predictions of student enrolments, the current procedure involves the specification of a level of funds consistent with the Commonwealth's broad fiscal policy and a determination of student numbers by calculation of the level that can be financed by the level of funds provided. In retrospect the change can be seen to signify the end of a whole approach to planning tertiary education which was initiated after the Murray Report. The decision fundamentally changes the nature of the Commission by removing it from its position as a buffer between institutions and governments and establishing it firmly as an agent for implementing government policy. The extent of the Commission's current influence on government policy cannot be readily gauged, but an examination

of the 'Razor Gang' report and the Minister for Education's statements since that time show that the Commission's advice and reports, like the Williams Report, tend to be used by the government only when they provide support for government decisions already reached on other grounds. O'Byrne and Lindsay went further by claiming that the Commission had attempted to provide an educational rationale for a government decision actually made on other grounds; they maintained that the TEC's case for a no-growth policy in higher education which was purported to be based on demographic trends, participation rates and labour market requirements, was not sound and that a 'more likely determinant of the policy is political decision-making in regard to broad, economic considerations, which has then been rationalized and presented as if the constraints involved were inherent in the educational and related factors'.²⁷ As a consequence, the Commission itself has ceased to have a major role in educational policy formation.

Commonwealth Government's Role in Policy-making

Much of what has already been said about the roles of committees of inquiry and the statutory commissions indirectly addresses the nature of the Commonwealth's role in policy-making. However, a number of significant factors have not yet been examined. These include the relationship of government decisions to the changing social and economic climates and to the political philosophies of the parties and the key political figures. In the first forty years of federation the Commonwealth Government persistently declined to become involved in the field of education. The 1940s brought the Commonwealth's acceptance of certain limited commitments and in the years that followed the range of these commitments has gradually widened. While making a substantial contribution to universities, the Menzies government resisted increasing the Commonwealth's commitments in the field of education except in specific cases which were seen to be of political advantage.²⁸ Nevertheless, from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s there was an unparalleled expansion of the Commonwealth Government's involvement in Australian education at all levels. The major instrument for the Commonwealth's increased participation was the statutory commission charged with advising on needs and recommending levels of financial support. Over this period, the trend in relationship between government and its commissions has been one of decreasing government reliance on the advice and recommendations tended by the commission. Government rejection of the financial recommendations of the Third Report of the Australian Universities Commission was the first indicator of this trend. Nevertheless, despite the pressures from the Treasury and from those States unwilling to increase their commitment to higher education, the commissions largely based their recommendations on the

'real needs' of the institutions rather than on the ability or willingness of governments to pay.²⁹ The rejection in 1975 of the reports from all four federal commissions marked the end of this practice and established the government's willingness to pay rather than any information on needs as the dominant factor in educational planning. Thus the commission's practice of adjusting its recommendations to result in a level of financing acceptable to government became the standard procedure. In a context of scarce resources and with society's 'needs' being almost unlimited, it is remarkable that a needs-based planning approach lasted for so long. Only a situation of strong economic growth and strong public demand for education could sustain such an approach. Clearly, the Federal Government now makes its policy decisions about the level of support for the tertiary education system, the level for each sector, and even for the institutional sub-sets, in relation to its broad social, political and economic objectives, and its estimation of electoral impact. This trend of a double shift in power, firstly from the education institutions to the co-ordinating agencies and then to the government, has also been reported in the United States at the state level by Millard³⁰ and Berdahl,³¹ and at the federal level by Conrad and Cosand,³² Bender,³³ and Mayville.³⁴

Much of the recent government concern about tertiary education has focused on the system inefficiencies which developed in the previous period of unco-ordinated expansion. While a good deal of criticism has been directed towards the education system and its institutions, a more appropriate target for much of the criticism would be the Commonwealth and State governments themselves and that whipping boy of Australian governments, the Commonwealth-State relationships. The failure of the Commonwealth and the States to formulate any overall policies for the development of tertiary education as a whole has already been discussed. Clearly this failure has been a prime cause of the current piecemeal structure and its associated inefficiencies. Secondly, the Commonwealth's decisions on the administrative arrangements for tertiary education have been a major contributing factor. These decisions resulted from government rejection of the advice of its expert committee of enquiry. The key events were government decisions following the report of the Martin Committee which resulted in the establishment of a system with two independent sectors which were not susceptible to comprehensive co-ordination. The rejection of the Martin Committee's recommendation for a tertiary education commission and the subsequent establishment of the Commission on Advanced Education was the genesis of the co-ordination problem. This decision, together with the government's failure to establish an adequate and agreed upon specification of the role of the advanced education sector, created the conditions under which 'the clash of Commonwealth, State, and institutional

views and interests produced the largely separate and unco-ordinated development of the tertiary education sectors'.³⁵ Recognition of the 'piecemeal' tradition in Australian educational planning is not new, for example Connell concludes: 'there has never been any attempt to plan the whole range of schooling as a single unit nor to devise machinery to ensure its various parts are interrelated to the best effect'.³⁶ Or to quote a State Minister for Public Works in the late 1960s:

*The present situation is intolerable because the approach to planning of higher education is fragmentary, spasmodic and unco-ordinated, the whole educational program resulting from ad hoc situations which conform to no known pattern of development. In other words, there is no overall fundamental educational philosophy which has been carefully defined, carefully evaluated as the guiding principle of policy decisions jointly required at State and Commonwealth level.*³⁷

This lack of overall policy and planning which has continued to the present has been at the heart of the malaise in Australia's tertiary education system. The Commonwealth commissions have been remiss in allowing the education system to be saddled with the blame for this deficiency, rather than establishing that the real origin of the problem lies with the policies of governments and their approach to education; and even more fundamentally, with the underlying structure of relations between the Commonwealth and the States.

The belated creation of the Tertiary Education Commission in 1977 has not yet noticeably improved the situation. The economic constraints of declining government expenditure on education, the legacies of the past separate development, and the underlying difficulties for co-ordination associated with the nature of the relationship between the Commonwealth and the States, have severely restricted the influence the Tertiary Education Commission has been able to have on the overall pattern of tertiary education. Further, the Commonwealth's downgrading of the policy role of the commission, and its continued adherence to the ad hoc and piecemeal tradition in educational planning means that the recent rationalization, supposedly made in the interests of system balance and efficiency, has, in fact, a very doubtful basis. Certainly, the Commonwealth has been unable to place individual decisions in a general context and demonstrate that they are consistent with overall plans for the future of tertiary education in Australia.

Conclusion

Since the Second World War the evolution of the arrangements for national-level policy-making for Australian higher education has been influenced by three major forces: the distribution of powers across

the national, State and institutional levels; the gradual acquisition of power by the Commonwealth; and government preference for piecemeal and ad hoc planning. Recently the gradual upward movement of power to the Commonwealth level has been joined by a horizontal shift at that level from the Commission to government ministers and their departments. The major effects of these changes have been: the erosion of university autonomy; the trend towards standardization within the tertiary system; and the change in the basis of planning so that the level of expenditure on higher education is no longer determined in relation to the Commission's estimation of institutional needs reached in consultation with States and the institutions, but by Commonwealth Government decision on the overall level of funding it is willing to provide. Thus, the universities have seen the substantial powers delegated to them by State governments in the university acts of incorporation effectively transferred firstly to the Commonwealth commission and then to the Commonwealth Government itself. The educational institutions are now regarded by the Commonwealth as no more than agencies of government, not important in themselves, but only insofar as they contribute to economic and social development, or some other aim of government. Philp's predictions have now been completely realised.³⁸

The assumption of power by the Commonwealth Government may yet increase the efficiency of the provision of higher education in Australia, but the signs are not encouraging. Neither the States nor the institutions have accepted that the Commonwealth's actions are legitimate or in the best interests of the higher education system and society. An effective strategy for improving higher education requires three difficult reforms. Firstly, the distribution of powers across the national, State and institutional levels must be made more consistent. Secondly, a planning and administration mechanism must be developed to be consistent with the distribution of powers and with the effective and efficient pursuit of objectives. Finally, the Commonwealth and the States must reach a better agreement on their educational priorities and objectives. This last reform is crucial if the piecemeal tradition is to be broken. It appears that recognition of this by politicians may be developing:

*It is arguable, of course, that we can muddle along as before, but I do not myself think so, and I believe we must be concerned with articulating a coherent, national role for education, consistent with overall national priorities and with the society with which we are concerned to develop, which will be best able to cope with the challenges confronting this nation over the next two decades.*³⁹

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