THE EROSION OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY IN AUSTRALIA

In April 1981 as part of the Review of Commonwealth Functions the Prime Minister announced the closure of the School of Engineering at Deakin University. The University's representatives were watered in the erosion of university autonomy that has been taking place over the last thirty years. The precedent has been set. At any time the Federal Government may decide to close any university department or faculty, or even a university, without prior enquiry or warning, by the use of its monetary powers. With this single action the past the vice-chancellors apparently did not see the importance of the decision.

This action attempted to place these most recent intrusions upon university autonomy in the context of developments over the last thirty years. One of the main themes in the article is that since the early seventies the role of the AUC and later the CTSC has been to implement and justify government policies. It is also unfortunate that this unifying belief in the CTSC has been one of the main obstacles to bringing together a broadly representative body of university staff in an organization dedicated to the defence of the universities and their autonomy.

The Context of Control

In an article in Unite Daniel Levy pointed out that "state power over higher education has been growing through much of the world", and that increasing world-wide state interest in higher education should be seen in the historical account of State concern for schooling in general. In the history of schooling in Australia and many other western countries over the last three hundred years, the most persistent pattern has been one of increasing State intervention: initially at the elementary school level and later through to secondary and tertiary. In Australia the colonial governments moved in to take over elementary schooling in the 1850s, and later between 1905 and 1915 they did the same for secondary schooling. An elaborate system of inspection was instituted. Schools conformed to the rules and courses laid down by the State bureaucracies.

It is too simple an explanation of this process, which has been extending to the tertiary field since the 1940s, to see it as the result of the governments desire to keep track of what happens to the money spent on schooling. This is only the outward manifestation of a general. What goes on in schools (and universities and colleges) is vital to those concerned with the preservation of the established order and the shape of the evolving society. The reformers who introduced universal elementary schooling in secondary schooling for all declared that they were acting in the 'national interest', just as Sir Robert Menzies described the closing of the University system in 1940s as an act of defense of the universities and their autonomy.

Another recent action by the Federal Government - the creation of centres of excellence - has been attacked because it will take research funds away from those institutions and faculties not lucky to be chosen as 'excellent'. But in the rhetoric of policy makers there has been little said about how it will further impinge upon university autonomy, particularly in the vital area of research. The decision will enable the Federal Government to direct substantial research funds into those areas the government of the day sees as important. The individual university will have less to spend on research. In the recent past the vice-chancellors apparently did not see this as a reasonableness, and the university systems in which they failed, but it did not save Deakin Engineering, nor did it stop the mergers being forced on the universities in New South Wales and Queensland.

In line with this grim determination to cling to the past the vice-chancellors apparently did not see the closure of Deakin Engineering as an attack on autonomy. When the decision was made to close the university as a legitimate use of federal monetary powers, the chairman of the AVCC described this as a reasonable attitude, and the universities systems in which they failed, but it did not save Deakin Engineering, nor did it stop the mergers being forced on the universities in New South Wales and Queensland.

The balance between state control and university autonomy has surely become the most salient question, cross-nationally, in the history of education. And it is also unfortunate that this was in the interests of his 'forgotten people' - the middle classes - which he equated with the 'national interest'.

Universities in Australia may have attracted little government interest until the 1940s, but once their expansion was under way and a greatly increased number of students were involved (many of whom were to become Federal and State civil servants), the system was significantly altered. State concern for schooling in general, this led to a further emphasis in the universities on the more specifically vocational courses in the sciences and studies. Even without fees the universities was in the interests of his 'forgotten people' - the middle classes - which he equated with the 'national interest'.

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Society demanded little of the universities. They were regarded as the custodians of society's cultural traditions. In Africa the
development of new training courses or research programmes, and the expansion of existing courses in those faculties where the governments (rather than the universities) saw a need. In this way society was further impinged on. The universities have all seen trends towards the erosion of university autonomy.

The political, social and economic repercussions of the Second World War changed all this, and forced the universities to face a new situation. Not only were they called upon to meet the demands of society requiring them to play a much more significant role in the training of skilled personnel, but they were confronted by increased student populations which seriously undermined their traditional isolation and elitism.

Apart from this physical growth which involved a greater State and federal investment in the universities, there was now a closer association between universities and governments. This was a distinct period in the emergence of the universities from the archaic, almost private and somewhat independent institutions, to becoming instruments of government policy. As the universities were creations of government, no changes in acts of incorporation were necessary but simply a shift in behaviour.

The universities were encouraged by governments to expand their facilities to meet what these government saw as State and national needs. This entailed the development of new training courses or research programmes, and the expansion of existing courses in those faculties where the governments (rather than the universities) saw a need. In this way society was further impinged on. The universities have all seen trends towards the erosion of university autonomy.

The universities and the Second World War

Until the Second World War the universities remained small, rather inefficient institutions, almost solely concerned with providing training for the professions and some higher clerical positions. Fees were charged in all universities except the University of Western Australia so that students were invariably drawn from the homes of parents who could afford the fees, although there was a very limited scheme of scholarships. Even without fees the universities would have been out of the reach of most students, because only a small minority went on to the higher levels of the secondary school.

They had become accountable to these governments. It might well be argued that the battle for university autonomy was already lost in these years. At any rate, the slide from being creations of government to creatures of government was well under way by the end of the Second World War. It was made possible by the establishment of the Australian Universities Commission (AUC) in 1959, the universities were strongly influenced by State and federal governments.

In 1959 the Commonwealth and 23.6% from fees. In 1940 the figures respectively were 38.5%, 33.6%, 13.4%.

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They had become accountable to these governments. It might well be argued that the battle for university autonomy was already lost in these years. At any rate, the slide from being creations of government to creatures of government was well under way by the end of the Second World War. It was made possible by the establishment of the Australian Universities Commission (AUC) following the Murray Report. With these changes came a significant shift in the sources of university funding. In 1940-44, 4% of total university income came from the States, 0% from the Commonwealth. Today, or nothing at all. The Commonwealth had emerged as a major source of university funds.2

1. F. B. Mollin says for such an organisation in 'A Case for an Association of Australian University in Visions 19, 1, 19/4, (IC)
The Murray Report proposed a Grants Committee, a form of 'buffer' device similar to the British institution. It was to be a semi-independent body existing between government and the universities. As in Britain it was to consist mainly of academics and to be left largely to its own devices, except for the actual financial parameters. It was to be a source of advice to the government on the needs of the universities.

There was also a much greater possibility of the various universities accepting directions and control from such a committee, than from the direct intervention of a minister for education. Harold Holt, Treasurer in the Menzies government, stressed this aspect when introducing the Bill to establish the Universities Commission. He saw the success of the new body as dependent upon it securing the confidence and trust of all those who are interested in the universities. It was not envisaged as a body of coercion.

The Australian Government did not entirely accept the notion of a 'grants' committee, because the Prime Minister (R.G. Menzies) felt that the committee should have a co-ordinating as well as a financial role. Although at the time this aspect was played down by the government and almost ignored by the academic community, it was to have a most profound influence on the future development of Australian universities. The function of the Commission were to advise the federal government on:

(a) the necessity for financial assistance and the conditions upon which any financial assistance should be granted; and
(b) the manner and allocation of financial assistance.

The acquisitiveness, and in many cases the support of academic staff for the passing of general university control and direction to a semi-government, non-elected and quite secretive body, may be explained during this period simply by the general acceptance of such policies as being in the best interests of all concerned. As has been pointed out, it was much easier for the universities to accept this type of control, in that it had been exercised directly by the government. Nevertheless, one could have expected that an alert academic community might have made use of these developments to raise basic questions of university autonomy and academic freedom.

Whatever the reason for this academic indifference to the present mostly of academic staff in the seventies it had some considerable success in convincing staff and vice-chancellors that it was just as concerned with the universities as it was with university autonomy. Nevertheless, the Sixth Report of the Commission did find it necessary to attempt a justification of government interference with the autonomy of the universities. The Commission saw no conflict between respect for university self-government and the need for universities to respond to community needs.

While it continued to reiterate its support for institutional autonomy it did not see it as an infringement of this autonomy if universities were asked to respond to government requests to expand facilities to train students for the various professions such as social work, special education, medicine and dentistry. This argument could also be applied to the expansion or abolition of university courses, as universities were to discover before the decade was over.

One of the most striking features of the discussions which were recorded in the sixties about the role of the universities was the absence of any real criticism of the establishment of the AUC on the assumption of power over Australian universities. For most academics, the Commission was the body which dispensed the money, and during the late fifties and the sixties there was plenty. In those golden years new universities were established, old ones extended, academic salaries were increased, promotion prospects brightened. By the end of the decade the power and influence of the Commission was complete.

While the Commission had no legal authority to require universities to conform to its directions it exercised its monetary powers in such a way as to secure effective control over the sitting and establishment of new universities and the nature of their courses of study. It became necessary for all university proposals to seek the Commission's approval before establishing new faculties and departments. This generally had to be sought in the universities' interests. The Commission virtually dictated the budget for the succeeding triennium. The extent of the universities' dependence on AUC largesse became apparent in the annual reports of the individual universities. They were formidable documents covering every aspect of university life from the setting up of new programmes, building proposals, library provisions, admissions policies, research prospects, advisory services, etc., as well as full details regarding student and staff projections and university finances.

During the fifties and the sixties the direction of university teaching and research was channelled away from the humanities and literary studies to the sciences, the technologies and the new social sciences. AUC became the main agent for the implementation of these changes. The Commission saw itself as acting in the national interest. It received moral support from the Murray and Martin enquiries and ac Rifle encouragement from government leaders who anticipated an over increasing demand for trained personnel to meet the needs of government, industry and the community.

When the Whitlam Labor Government threatened to establish a Tertiary Education Commission there was a chorus of protest from the vice-chancellors and university senior staff. The relationship which was said to exist between the universities and the Commission would be lost. No one actually spelled out how this relationship worked out in practice, but the implication was that it was a very personal, individual (almost subtle) affair rather than, it was implied, the more heavy-handed relationship which existed between the Colleges of Advanced Education and the Commission on Advanced Education. The AUC had worked hard and with much success to conceal its real power over the universities which, nevertheless, effectively limited their autonomy in a multitude of ways.

An important underlying factor was the development of the technical education sector and its dramatic expansion in the seventies. It broadened its offerings and separated into two sectors - advanced education, and technical and further education. The cost and complexity of three sectors of post-secondary education provided additional momentum to the exercise of federal power. Post-secondary education was only of national significance in itself, but federal value could not be realised, it was argued, until it was systematised.

Thus in the three post-war decades as individual and idiosyncratic institutions were thread together into a system of higher education, two marked shifts in power occurred as far as universities were concerned - from State to federal government, and from universities to the government via the agency of the AUC.

The Universities and the TEC

The Tertiary Education Commission was established on 22 July 1973, with the Federal Government providing the present source of advice on tertiary education (now called the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission). It has three Councils — one of each of the tertiary sectors. The Commission described its functions in the following way in its first publication, "Recommendations for 1978":

(a) inquire into and advise the Minister on any other matter relating to tertiary institutions in Australia, referred to by the Minister or which the Commission considers requires inquiry by it;
(b) perform, on behalf of the Commonwealth, administrative functions in relation to programs of financial assistance for tertiary education;
(c) advise the Minister as to the institutions and proposed institutions that should be regarded as universities or colleges of advanced education and technical and further education or institutions for the purposes of the Act;
(d) where required by the Minister, inquire into and provide advice to him in relation to institutions established or proposed by the Commonwealth for the provision of tertiary education.

The Commission is required to consult State authorities responsible for matters relating to universities, colleges of advanced education and technical and further education institutions. It is to perform its functions with the object of promoting:

(a) the balanced and co-ordinated development of the provision of tertiary education in Australia; and
(b) the diversifying of opportunities for tertiary education.

The function of each Council is:

(a) to inquire into and advise the Minister and the Commission on matters relating to its sector;
(b) in accordance with the Commission's directions, to provide assistance to the Commission in matters relating to its sector, in particular, in administration of programs of financial assistance and representation of the Commission on sectoral matters; and
(c) in relation to the Commission to provide assistance to it in matters other than those relating to its particular sector.

Thus the responsibilities of the new TEC were much wider than those given to the AUC in 1959, but were probably only a recognition of the actual responsibilities the AUC (and the Australian Universities Commission) had assumed over the years by the exercise of their monetary powers. These had become doubly significant when the Federal Government assumed the responsibility for financing all higher education from 1 January 1974.

The new structure of the TEC downgraded the three commissions which had been to the AUC in 1959, and was probably only a recognition of the actual responsibilities the AUC (and the Australian Universities Commission) had assumed over the years by the exercise of their monetary powers. These had become doubly significant when the Federal Government assumed the responsibility for financing all higher education from 1 January 1974.
Prior to 1976 the commissions gathered together the data from the tertiary institutions necessary to assist the needs of those institutions for each triennium. The commissions then made their recommendations to the government regarding policy direction and financial expenditure. In an era of expansion in the tertiary sector the Federal Government generally accepted these recommendations without making substantial alterations. All this changed in 1975 when the Whitlam Government, in the face of financial stringency, rejected the recommendations of the commissions for the forthcoming triennium, and abandoned the system of triennial funding which had been originally instituted by Menzies in 1959 (against strong Treasury opposition). For 1976 the 1975 levels of funding were applied. Thus the commissions' recommendations were overridden and the way thrown open for the issue of funding of higher education in the next triennium.20

In 1976 the Fraser Government restored the triennial system on a 'rolling' basis, but at the same time issued guidelines for the commissions which laid down the limits for government funding and also indicated government policy directions. This constituted a major reversal of the role of the commissions which were now forced to work in line with the government directives. Any independence they had previously exercised was now effectively eliminated.21

But to make the government's role even more effective the new body, the TEC, was necessary. It was not simply another tier in the bureaucratic structure, but a body much more closely tuned to government thinking and policy. In composition it was dominated by 'political' appointments, the representation of the three councils being confined to the role of 'producers'. It has been impossible to monitor the recommendations of the three councils and draw them into line with government policy. It has been difficult to maintain these in line with government pressures prior to 1976, the commissions saw themselves as making a case to the government for expenditure in each sector, a case not always corresponding with the reality. The TEC's role has been to implement government policy and get the recommendations of the three councils to conform to the government's views. The TEC's advice would stand in higher education if you took the recommendations of the three councils and took it to the government. The TEC has been a government agency and its decisions must be vetted by the government. The TEC's recommendations were overridden and the way thrown open for the issue of funding of higher education in the next triennium.22

We first find the Commission taking it upon itself to prove the hegemonic claims of the universities. It is not simply from a co-ordination and co-operative source that the TEC has taken what it regards as the universities' upper limit. It is therefore difficult to escape the conclusion that the TEC's efforts at labour market forecasting (manpower planning), particularly in regard to teacher education, have been naive and anachronous to provide a statistical rationale for the government's policy of drastically cutting back on teacher education and the closure or amalgamation of colleges which have been linked with the efforts to redirect students into the business studies and the technologies. In doing this, late in 1979 the TEC issued a working paper on the supply and demand for new teacher graduates in the 1980s. This is an extremely crude attempt to justify cuts in teacher education. The assumptions and even the arithmetic of this paper were reviewed by Turner from La Trobe University in A Critical Response published by the Federation of Australian University Staff Associations. A further effort was made in the TEC's Report for the 1982-84 Triennium which devoted many pages to labour market forecasting for engineering, teacher education and medicine.23

In this Report the TEC has taken it upon itself to make the teacher's job more financial and to bas its recommendations on that limit.24 However, Gerald Burke from Monash University has shown quite convincingly that this so-called upper limit is in fact a mid-range estimate, and he concludes that 'De mand could quite easily rise some 5 to 15 per cent above the TEC's upper estimate'.25 It is therefore difficult to escape the conclusion that the TEC's efforts at labour market forecasting, particularly in its efforts to demonstrate the need for cuts,26 have over-reacted to the embarrassment of the Victorian Government in much the same way as any government department.

The Universities and the State Co-ordinating Bodies

There are now co-ordinating bodies established by statute in four States (Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales) and non- statute in Western Australia, and in the Northern Territory (see Appendix A). The co-ordinating bodies all have general advisory functions to the minister of education in each State or Territory, but they differ significantly in their powers and functions. In general these bodies have been mainly concerned with the non-university sector of tertiary education, and, if they have shown some reluctance to interfere with university autonomy. Nevertheless, there have been a number of developments which suggest that as these bodies extend their powers and responsibilities to the universities under their influence. There is a simple, seductive appeal in the plea that their value as State planning bodies is radicalising the university system and its relationships with each of the three different sectors. To do the job properly, they argue, they must have equal power in each sector. The Victorian (VTESC), South Australian (TEASA) and Western Australian (WAPSEC) bodies present the greatest potential threat to university independence both because of their statutory powers, and in the case of VTESC and WAPSEC, their proposed upper limit. All three have power to require any post-secondary institution to furnish them with information and to require the institutions to inform them of all applications, submissions, etc., made to the TEC. While this process does not prevent the institutions making submissions to the TEC, it means that the State body is able to comment on these submissions and lay them before the government.

The most serious development affecting the universities has been the power given to these three bodies in relation to the approval of new courses of study. In the name of achieving 'rationalisation of resources' and preventing 'unnecessary duplication' each of these three bodies now has a role in looking at new courses of study.

The WAPSEC Act specifies that an institution must advise it before making any submission on the introduction, discontinuation or significant change in the character or content of any course, and (with other submissions to the TEC) this may be delayed for up to thirty days. WAPSEC may advise the governing bodies of post-secondary bodies, and make recommendations on the approval of proposed courses and the establishment of new courses. It has no role of course approval as such, although it may determine the minimum requirements for courses of study. WAPSEC also advises on salaries and conditions of employment.

The TEASA Act similarly specifies that it must be informed of any applications by an institution to the TEC on the introduction, continuation, discontinuation or significant change in content of any existing course, and TEASA may make recommendations to any institution, or to the TEC as to courses that may or may not be provided. TEASA does, however, have the power of course approval as far as advanced education institutions are concerned; it has the power to increase or reduce such courses and approve or award courses to be made; an advanced education institution may not introduce a new course unless TEASA has approved it. But this does not apply to universities. The WAPSEC Act is the most restrictive of all. WAPSEC has the power to require the institutions to provide the WAPSEC bodies with copies of reports as far as advising what courses of study should be offered. But only not must a post-secondary institution advise it before making any submissions to Commonwealth authorities (or any subject) but also the WAPSEC Act provides that a post-secondary institution shall not expend funds supplied by the Government of Victoria or the Government of the Commonwealth upon a course of study introduced after the commencement of any section unless that course has been approved by the Commission.28

This means that in Victoria a new course in a university, having passed through the university's own committees, must then be vetted by WAPSEC as well as the TEC. While rationalisation may be the overt aim of this control mechanism it can also result in full-scale accreditation of university courses by outside bodies. It is therefore difficult to escape the conclusion that the TEC's efforts at labour market forecasting, particularly in its efforts to demonstrate the need for cuts, have over-reacted to the embarrassment of the Victorian Government in much the same way as any public servants. In fact, in the areas of post-secondary education in Victoria the government has had to back away from what it was envisaged in recent draft legislation in Victoria.29

A vital consideration with these co-ordinating bodies is how their members see their role. Are they simply public servants carrying out the government's wishes or do they see themselves as experts advising the appropriate minister and exercising a measure of independence? There are marked differences between the three co-ordinating bodies in their function which does suggest that their roles vary from State to State. What appears as a highly secretive, consensual approach by WAPSEC is in marked contrast with the fairly open and co-operative stance taken by TEASA. WAPSEC documents are 'non-public' and only its annual report is public; and its stance generally secretive also. The members of VPSEC are keen to carry out the government's wishes and in the name of achieving 'rationalisation of resources'. WAPSEC and TEASA also advise on salaries and conditions of employment.

The VPSEC operations have been criticised in that the operators have shown a lack of tact and negotiating skills. There has been little co-operation with the universities and the TEC. TEASA has tried to enforce its wishes by directives rather than negotiation. On the other hand TEASA has generally co-operated with the tertiary institutions and has been willing to change or modify proposals. In VPSEC's case there is a need for that organisation to have some expertise and to be to judge from the quality of the background material which has been made public.
From Murray to the Fourth A. U.C. Report’, most cogent statements on university autonomy to research has been done in this area. Academic to pursue his or her teaching and research as the Federation of University institutional controls which have been developed or autonomy of universities in recent years, e.g. the demands of central associations and registration boards, the pressures from such bodies as the Federalation of University Pressures from such organisations may well have been as limiting as government pressures, but little research has been done in this area.

Is university autonomy worth worrying about? I believe it is because of its close interrelationship with academic freedom. The freedom of the individual academic to pursue his or her teaching and research as he or she wishes is closely linked with the ability of the academic or university policies on teaching and research, just as the latter is dependent on the ability of the university to devise its own programmes of teaching and research without outside interference. Ironically enough one of the most cogent statements on university autonomy to appear in recent years was in the Sixth Report of the AUC. It stated that the commitment to university autonomy stems from a conviction that universities will in general better achieve their purposes by self-governmert than by detailed intervention on the part of the public authorities. The purposes for which universitites are founded and for which society continues to maintain them, include the preservation, transmission and extension of knowledge, the training of highly qualified personnel, the critical evaluation of the society in which we live. One of the most familiar images of the university is that of a sanctuary of freedom, a freedom to be the conscience and critic of that society; such a role cannot be fulfilled if the university is expected to be an arm of government policy.

The ability of a university and its staff to be the ‘conscience and critic of society’ depends largely on university and academic autonomy. But it also carries with it a measure of social responsibility, to be fulfilled if the university is to be a refuge of privilege for the few’... the community is accepting heavy burdens (i.e. university financing) in order that, through the training of university graduates, the universities must serve the nation and be clear that the universities must serve the nation and be financed in accordance with the provisions of the University Grants Committee Acts 1970-1976.

Appendix A

The State and Territory Co-ordinating Bodies

All the existing tertiary co-ordinating bodies were established during the 1960s. They are as follows:

Western Australia — Western Australian Post-Secondery Education Commission (established by the W.A. Post-Secondary Education Commission Act 1970-1976) WAPSEC

New South Wales — NSW Higher Education Board (established by the Higher Education Act 1975) NSWWEB

Queensland — Joint Advisory Committee on Post-Secondary Education (established by the Queensland Minister for Education in 1976 as a statutory body) JACPSE (QLD)

Victoria — Victorian Post-Secondary Education Commission (established by the Post-Secondary Education Act (Vic.) 1981)

South Australia — Tertiary Education Authority of South Australia (established by the Tertiary Educa­tion Authority Act 1979) TEASA

Tasmania — Tertiary Education Commission of Tasmania (established by Cabinet Minute with effect from 1 January 1979)

Northern Territory — Post-School Advisory Council (established in accordance with the provisions of the N.T. Education Act 1979, as an advisory body to the N.T. Education Minister) PSAC (NT)

References

6. In 1957 the Prime Minister, R.G. Menzies, made it clear that the universities must serve the nation and be independent so that the university is a true independent institution.
10. Ibid., vol. 17, p.2668.
12. For example see La Trobe University, Submission to the Australian Universities Commission, 1976, 1978 Triennium, Vol. 1 and 2, December 1973. The UC Report for 1977-79 Triennium, July 1976 (Canberra 1977) gives a graphic indication of the power of the UC over the universities. Not particularly 6.5-7-5 60 (pp. 84-9) on new developments in universities where the UC rejects almost every new proposal put forward by the universities.
15. Ibid., p.70.
19. Hugh Philp argued in 1970 that the AUC had already become merely another government department, its recommendations were made according to decisions already made by the government instead of being on the basis of those decisions. See H. Philp ‘The Paper and the Tune’ — From the Fourth to the Fourth Fourth A.U.C. Report, Australian Universities, May 1970, 6, 1, pp.24-7.
20. The TEC consists of four full-time members (chairman and the chairman of the three council) plus five part-time members appointed by the government.
21. From notes of an address given by Professor J.P. Fensham at a National Conference on the TEC Report, Teacher Education Contraction, Forced Amalgamations, Multi-Campus, Arrangements, organised by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 27 July 1981.
30. The best example of this was the attempts by VPRSC to define policy on the future of teacher education in Victorian state colleges late in 1979. Far-reaching cuts were recommended and made with consultation with the institutions concerned.