NATIONAL POLICY-MAKING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

National Policy-making for Higher Education

Nearly all higher education institutions in Australia, the majority of universities, are public institutions established by government, and supported by the Commonwealth Government. As Commonwealth involvement has increased, so has the extent of national-level policy formulation. However, before examining in detail the relationship between government and the higher education system, it is important to place this relationship in a broader context since policy formulation is not simply determined by the power relationship and the interaction between these policies, the influences and constraints operating on the political environment. Thus, in addition to the two levels of government and the range of institutions in this sector, there are many other influences and constraints operating on the political environment for higher education. He identifies five categories of influence: higher education institutions, (public and private), the national and state governments, the political environment, and 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, as the major part of the present paper, is based on legislation and funding. It is important to note that the Commonwealth-Statel relationship is a three-dimensional interplay of forces at the national level, and the mechanisms which have produced some national dominance are a result of the Commonwealth-State relationships. The States have delegated certain powers to the Commonwealth, and national policies are those relating to national considerations and the Commonwealth is responsible for them. However, before examining in detail the relationship between government and the higher education system, it is important to place this relationship in a broader context since policy formulation is not simply determined by the power relationship and the interaction between these policies, the influences and constraints operating on the political environment. Thus, in addition to the two levels of government and the range of institutions in this sector, there are many other influences and constraints operating on the political environment for higher education. He identifies five categories of influence: higher education institutions, (public and private), the national and state governments, the political environment, and the role of governments in higher education policy-making must be undertaken within the context of Commonwealth-State relationships.

However, as a result of the Commonwealth's extensive powers over education, the effect of their dominance has been reduced by the growing financial power of the States, and the Commonwealth has not been able to achieve continued dominance policy-making.

Commonwealth Committees of Enquiry

The growth in the Commonwealth's involvement in higher education has coincided with a unique period of change in the political system. The Commonwealth has been an instrumental role in establishing the framework in which the changes occurred. The main role of the committees of inquiry 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 changes and their implications for education have not remained constant and so each committee of inquiry has been faced with a different situation arising from the task. The division of powers between the Commonwealth and the States, as the major part of the present paper, is based on legislation and funding. It is important to note that the Commonwealth-State relationship is a three-dimensional interplay of forces at the national level, and the mechanisms which have produced some national dominance are a result of the Commonwealth-State relationships.

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The Commonwealth, as an example, has existed largely as an outcome of the Commonwealth's dominance in the absence of any specific legislative powers. While the Commonwealth's financial dominance and hence the existing distribution of power, there is no one particular committee or participant in tertiary education, which has the management control of the national system and that consequently, the direction of events is determined by planning by the unmanageable interplay of forces at the national, State and institutional levels. The Commonwealth, the States and educational institutions exercise their powers to influence the development of the system. They have pursued different and sometimes conflicting objectives, and it is sometimes difficult to achieve continued dominance in policy formulation. 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 policy making, but different reactions, it would be difficult to be optimistic. The inconsistent distribution of power and the perceived, unco-ordinated system which has resulted from it provides the context in which the roles of government and their agencies in the policy-making process must be examined.
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 formulation and administration, and in response to the Commonwealth’s accumulation and exercise of power there is a strong inference that the States have established their own planning and coordinating authorities.

The importance of the legitimation 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 University-Chancellors’ Committee Report in 1962, 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. The Commonwealth participation necessary for the upgrading was already in existence, and resulted in the establishment of a binary system of two kinds of higher education institution. This development of a clearly differentiated set of purposes for the CAEs contributed significantly to the co-ordination problems of the 1970s.

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 tertiary education. The establishment of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission 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.

Commonwealth Government Commissions

At least partly as a consequence of the lack of direct legislative involvement 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 University of Western Australia Act of 1911, and the Commonwealth Government restructured the Australian Universities Commission as a semi-autonomous body and assigned itself to expressing the ‘balanced development of universities so that their resources may be used to the greatest possible advantage’, in the general pattern of Commonwealth entry as follows: the Commonwealth would appoint a commission, chaired by an eminent person, prepare a report recommending a course of action to the government. A term for such a report was usually established, and the government would request the university sector, to advise the federal government on national policy guidelines and appropriate levels of financial assistance. 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. In addition to the expansion of the university sector, the elevation of some institutions 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 CUC give an explicit account of what it means by balanced development’. Williams goes on to examine the different approaches made in the States and the Commission’s failure 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 clearly specified, the resulting guidelines would make it extremely difficult to implement any overall policy. They suggested that the Commission may have reasonably thought that institutional differences in the tertiary sector, the different status of the Commonwealth and the States, and the different need for participation rates should be preserved and developed.’ While over the period government and Commission policies had been largely directed towards rationalisation in ways which produce a more standardized and homogeneous system. Arguments for special needs and special circumstances have been put to the forefront of this issue and, in these cases, communities are being preserved and developed.

Nevertheless, the concept of ‘balanced development’ was subsequently included in the objectives of the Commonwealth on Advanced Education, and finally ‘balanced and co-ordinated development’ in those of the Tertiary Education Commission. While these bodies occasionally used the phrase ‘balanced development’ either across the States, across the tertiary education sectors, or across the levels and fields of study, they have not so readily used it in the States, which mix on any of these dimensions would constitute a desirable ‘balance’ and of what policies the Commission is able to achieve. Nevertheless, the different position in the States, for example, one dimension of balance, the question of differences in participation across the States, is discussed in Volume 2 of the 1971 Report. The TEC concluded that, as a consequence of the differing State needs and 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 3.6 per cent for colleges) and 1981 (for example, the rates for Western Australia are 3.8 per cent and 3.9 respectively), could be explained in relation to the labour market characteristics, school, or other social patterns of each State. In the absence of any notion and evidence of balance in relation to individual State requirements or across State relativities, it appears that the differences are not the result of a conscious policy 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’s view put to Parliament by Senator Carrick in 1977 that ‘there is no need for a national policy to encourage the development of distinctive and authentic characteristics of the three various sectors. Policies should promote the different sectors’; these should be preserved and developed.’ While over the period government and Commission policies had been largely directed towards rationalisation in ways which produce a more standardized and homogeneous system. Arguments for special needs and special circumstances have been put to the forefront of this issue and, in these cases, communities are being preserved and developed.

Substantial differences still exist in the way the Commonwealth Councils relate to States, but an emerging trend towards standardization and uniformity is apparent. Yet, the Councils are heterogeneously 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 constraint rules across entire sectors, and, in some cases, across the entire tertiary system.
Some time ago Hughes argued that centralization in education was as opposed to diversity and the adoption of standard approaches instead of the freedom to experiment. More recently Neal Warren has argued that the limit of centralization, there is simple evidence to support the view that centralization is increasing despite all the protests that have been heard and expressed. It is hard to see how this point was made by the Tertiary Education Commission in particular to deal with the increasing recognition of the spread of uniformity of centralization can be seen at the State level as well as the Commonwealth level, 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.

Initially, each of the separate tertiary commissions developed quite different relationships with their institutions and the States, and for this reason 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. Commission operated for the longest period with the most autonomous institutions. In its first report the Australian Universities Commission stated that it worked 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. Differing views have been expressed on 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 relationship has resulted in less autonomy. The Williams Report argues that this is a consequence of the Commission's respect for traditional autonomy, the acceptance by Australian universities of the need for national planning, and the close working relationship between the universities and the Commission. Both Greatbatch and Kerby were expressed with Philip's claim that the Commonwealth was "calling the tune", and the universities were dancing to it. Derham also supports this interpretation of the effect of the Commission's advice and the strength with which the Commission's advice was followed. Thus, it appears that there have been considerable changes in the way universities are viewed. Increasingly the Commonwealth's policy is focused on the constraints on universities, 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 States also had strong views. From the time of the Martin Report, the Commonwealth's plans for advanced education have been frustrated by the lack of commitment from the States. The report of the Commission, which has been reinforced by the pressures for government's acceptance of certain limited commitments and in the Commonwealth Government's increased participation the federalism will be one of federation governance. The policy for advanced education has been frustrated because of the quite different philosophies of funds consistent with the Commission's current influence on government policy. This commission itself has ceased to have a major role in educational policy formation.

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. Commission operated for the longest period with the most autonomous institutions. In its first report the Australian Universities Commission stated that it worked 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. Differing views have been expressed on 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 relationship has resulted in less autonomy. The Williams Report argues that this is a consequence of the Commission's respect for traditional autonomy, the acceptance by Australian universities of the need for national planning, and the close working relationship between the universities and the Commission. Both Greatbatch and Kerby were expressed with Philip's claim that the Commonwealth was "calling the tune", and the universities were dancing to it. Derham also supports this interpretation of the effect of the Commission's advice and the strength with which the Commission's advice was followed. Thus, it appears that there have been considerable changes in the way universities are viewed. Increasingly the Commonwealth's policy is focused on the constraints on universities, to be co-ordinated, initially within a university system and more recently, within the tertiary education system.

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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 decision-making in social and economic terms with the Commonwealth's existing relative influences in the allocation of funds consistent with the Commonwealth's current influence on government policy. This commission itself has ceased to have a major role in educational policy formation.

Much of the recent government concern about tertiary education has focused on the system's capacity to make better use of the opportunities offered by increased participation in higher education which was initiated after the Murray Report. The Commonwealth's increased participation was the genesis of the Commonwealth's accumulation of considerable changes in the way universities are viewed. Increasingly, the Commonwealth's policy is focused on the constraints on universities, to be co-ordinated, initially within a university system and more recently, within the tertiary education system. This commission itself has ceased to have a major role in educational policy formation.

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views and interests produce the large and uncoordinated development of the tertiary education sector. Recognition of the 'piecemeal' tradition in Australian planning is not to question, for example, Connell concludes: 'there has never been any attempt to plan the whole range of school- ing education'. The answer is, however, that no overall governmental machinery exists which can deal with its various parts is interrelated to the best effect. Or to quote a State Minister for Public Works in the late 1960s:

The present situation is intolerable because the approach of government towards the whole field of higher education is fragmentary, spasmodic and uncoordinated, 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 defined, carefully evaluated as the guiding principle of policy decisions jointly required at State and Commonwealth level.

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 in establishing that the real origin of the problem lies with the policies of governments and the Commonwealth 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 1973 has not yet noticeably improved the situation. The economic constraints of declining government revenue and the legacies of the past separate development, and the underlying difficulties for co-ordination associated with the nature of the relationships between the Commonwealth and the States, have severely restricted the influence the Tertiary Education Commission has been able to have on the whole educational program.

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 for another two decades in this way and I believe we must be conscious of the real origin of the problem in educational planning, 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.

References
12. Hughes, op. cit.
15. Williams, The Australian University, op. cit., p.130.
24. Williams, The Australian University, op. cit., p.130.