Privatisation and academic freedom

The tradition of academic freedom in Australian institutions of higher education was brought to the Australian colonies by the early pre-generations of the British cultural tradition in this country. In its liberal intellectual sense it was a tradition that demanded a tolerance of a range and diversity of approaches and opinions within an institution. In fact it could lead to positive encouragement of unorthodox opinions, and was linked with the assumption that these could be advocated without fear of persecution or reprimad. At the same time it was recognized that the academics and the institutions had a responsibility to society to be critical of accepted knowledge and practices in such a way as to benefit that society. With this went the belief that staff would be apprised of the basis of qualifications for the position rather than because of favouritism or politics, race, religion etc. Of course there was one very important proviso in all this, i.e. this was applicable within the parameters of the British cultural tradition within British capitalist society.

This tradition demanded a certain interference between these levels within the university environment on which the functioning of academic freedom depended — i.e. the freedom of the individual teacher to teach without fear or favour and the ability of the teacher to influence the institution on academic matters, and the functioning of the institution free of outside control or interference.

In the first 100 years of universities in Australia the academic's main problem in this particular respect related to the second of these three levels of interaction.

The Universities of Sydney and Melbourne had been established in the 19th century on the English and Scottish examples, yet different in several aspects. One area of significant difference for this article concerned the power of the university councils or senates. Whereas in Britain and European universities there was a long tradition of internal self-government with which was associated various rights and privileges, the Australian universities had no such local tradition. Academic staff naturally tried to apply the British and European traditions to the Australian scene, but this was difficult due to the manner in which these universities were established and also because of the lack of the development of any close relationships with their local communities.

The Acts which led to the establishment of the various universities in each colony gave the ultimate power in university decision making to the lay members appointed by the colonial governments and in the early days with no representation from the academic staff. Conflict on academic and financial matters between the lay personnel or council was common. Professors of the University of Melbourne made many attempts in the early years of that university to broaden the curriculum and to abolish the discipline of classics, but the council of the university resisted this until 1860, after a protracted battle, the council approved science subjects being included in the matriculation examination.

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Lack of academic autonomy went with a lack of community support and little understanding of a university's traditional role. This was reflected in the failure of the colonial universities to attract any substantial grants from private sources, which forced them to rely heavily on the colonial and later the state governments. At the same time there was often hostility and suspicion expressed in the press and parliament towards the universities. They were seen as the playgrounds for the sons of the idle rich by members of the labour movement, and even Australian conservatives were quick to criticise grants to the universities and to demand "value" for public expenditure. Accusations that university teachers expounded "outmoded and useless knowledge" were common.

This background of state control exerted through the university councils and the lack of sympathy with university ideals in the community made it a difficult task for academic staff to establish a tradition of academic freedom and academic authority in matters of teaching and research.

During the late 1930s and the 1940s Australian universities underwent a

"Those who oppose fees need to collectively refine the arguments against fees not simply on political but on equity grounds."

The analysis of established facts from the 60s until the present. The arguments against fees need to be linked forcibly to the impact of either proposal on the future.

In the meantime, students, and often their families, are facing an immediate dilemma. The imposition of this change will have an effect upon students in 1987. In the months ahead this must be well-documented by institutions and universities, those who oppose the HEAC and who fear its possible implications.

If there is any short term value in the HEAC at this stage, it will be to focus attention on the inadequacy of the TEAS system both administratively and in terms of equity of application. The student income support system is based mainly on the middle income/weekly class concept of general support. It is based upon a limited definition of income which discriminates against students in favour of the self-employed and others who can disguise effective incomes. The inadequacies in the HEAC application in the short term and the inadequacies of the TEAS means test as a substitute for an equitable definition of income and taxation system emphasises even further the urgent need to settle the debate.

In summary, those in the community who view the HEAC with concern and who fear the exaction of the HEAC into a full-on tertiary tuition fee, should document experiences with the application of the HEAC, mount consistent pressure to remove the long-standing anomalies of the income support system because of its effect upon the application of the HEAC, and renew the education process upon those who live under the illusion that tuition fees equal equity and access.
Academic units would in effect become the consumers of strategic business units, having substantial revenue streams and incurring substantial cost streams. Since units would be responsible for the costs of their own operations, the university would be free to raise costs, cut costs, or some combination of both. The university would be free to decide which units to fund, which units to trim, and which units to close. This would enable the university to achieve its goals more efficiently and effectively, leading to improved quality of education and research.

There is a stark contrast between the campaigns for 'community involvement' in schools and the demands emanating from senior federal public servants and higher education institutions to demand the removal of 'market forces'..."
privatization of state schooling. While it envisages the Ministry of Education retaining its general direction of curriculum, finances and teacher involvement, it provides for the financial autonomy of individual schools that will be given a grant which will be used to finance virtually the entire functioning costs of the school. The school councils will be able to determine curriculum, select teaching and ancillary staff, prepare the school budget, staff leave, employ emergency teachers, and take major decisions about the purchase and sale of school furniture and equipment etc. Under the slogans of 'accountability', 'consumerism', and 'accountable government', the schools are to be handed over to local community representation and a council which will in fact be a continuation of a long standing training institutions whereby the private schools are seen as the spearhead by which the state schools should be measured. The Ministry is also considering calculating the grants to be given to schools on a per capita basis — these schools which are smaller in size will receive the highest grants. These proposals, if implemented, will narrow the gap between the functioning of private and state schools to such an extent that we may define the state schools as being very easy for any future non-Labour government.

One reason why these assumptions which have been obscured by the Victorian government's 'proposal' for the 1990s is that democracy refers to which in turn means that the 'accountability' argument — the assumption that more democracy will make the schools become more relevant to the needs of the local community — must not only lose any autonomy they have in this respect (for the minister has had a great deal of public pressure on them) but subject it to increasing pressures to conform to the local community groups. For the state school teacher privatization of schooling will mean a less secure position of professional freedom and professional autonomy.

There are close parallels between the privatization of the family and the privatization of schooling and the demands emanating from 'consumerism' and the business community for higher education institutions to respond to the demands of the market. The effect of these pressures, the loss of the autonomy and commitment of the family, the increasing loss of freedom from outside interference with the institution of the family in favour of market forces,畋, abolishing tenure and engaging in entrepreneurial activity which would attract the best students, will change institutions or to their staff's outlook. Is it any wonder that the performance of the institutions of education in Australia is to be measured by 'market forces' and the ability to attract students through the provision of facilities and courses with obvious implications for university councils/senates and academic staff is not possible, given that most of the controlling bodies of institutions of higher education do not provide for a significant number of political appointees, as well as 'representatives' of local communities or specific interest groups. Strong political pressures on these councils/senates could lead to a wide array of measures regarding appointments, tenure, courses and research which would bring these bodies into head to head conflict with the academic staff. It was shown earlier in this article that the independence of academic authority in these matters goes back little more than twenty years. A challenge to the autonomy of the academic staff is a challenge to the bounds of the possibility given the current ascendancy of the 'New Right' policies in both the research and influence on existing political parties. Institutions of higher education and their staff are not altogether blameless in this process towards privatization and all the threats that are attached to that process.

In 1978 I wrote in a paper —

... one major problem which will face Australian universities and their staff over the next decade is their disinterest in and alienation from their universities. It made it so much easier for governments to institute controls and to cut funding. This will clearly be a problem for universities which has been an important part of the Australian university system over the last twenty years. While it is convenient to dismiss this as simply part of the general anti-intellectualism which pervades Australian life, university staff have shown little desire to converse in the main, and publicly that they are concerned with Australian problems and have positive contributions to community welfare...

... ignoring the local scene is not helping to cause the help of academic freedom in Australia...

While most universities have few problems convincing the public of the value of the credentials they can offer their students, the research side of the work of universities is not generally understood by the general public. Universities are seen as being surrounded by the thicket of research, and research, and research, and research, and teaching and research. It is partly the result of poor public relations and the historical tendency for universities in Australia to be isolated and incommunicado to the general public. It has also been assisted by the failure to publicize the positive results of university research. Too much of the research has been hampered because too many academics have been preoccupied with or interested in the problems of this country. Too often we see our colleagues insist on reversing historical, literary, scientific, environmental aspects of other countries. Present day economic research of most universities offer financial inducements to the extent that their study have overseas, and little help for those who wish to carry out research in Australia on their own. The financial arrangements are a direct incentive to academics to go abroad, and the universities from Australia. Anyone who has been on appointments, promotion, tenure committees for too long has had no desire to change his life's experience/degrees/refers to a low regard for Australian equivalents.

Of course no one wants universities to go to the other extreme of becoming dominated by the provincialism apparent in many North American institutions. Nevertheless, ignoring the local scene is not helping to cause the help of academic freedom in Australia. Universities need a clearer understanding for their research endeavours, both financially and politically, but this will only be achieved if they are seen to be interested in local issues which would obviously be helped by publicizing the positive results of research which is often hampered because too many academics are preoccupied with or interested in the problems of this country. Too often we see...