Working in the present

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A colleague, no recently departing academia for a senior post in the public service, applied the books and journals he thought it unlikely he would need in his new role to provide him with a sense of continuity with his previous work. As the pile grew, however, it became clear that more was involved than a sense of continuity with his previous work. For it was quite evident that a reasonably comprehensive social science library, recently accumulated over two to three decades, was being subjected to an ideological culling of no mean proportions.

Browsing through the abundant volumes on the off-chance of adding a choice item or two to our own collections proved, for those of us left behind, something of an exercise in nostalgia. Early issues of the Border Journal of Sociology, the complete set of Theoretical Practice, the Penguin translation of Marx's Grundrisse, the writings of Fromm, De Certeau's preceding utopia of Treskutyy - an unexpected re-acquaintance peeked over half a dozen or twenty or even ten years ago, would have occupied a well-thumbed position at the front of most of our shelves but which, subsequently, had been edged to the back and sometimes out of sight, no longer in regular use.

While this made for scholarly pickings, it did provide food for thought in publicly dramatising an intellectual activity which, over the past decade or so, has been a fairly common one for academics working in the social sciences and humanities. Viewed exultantly in the light of the 21st-century legacies of the Dawkins reforms, this might appear to be simply one of a crowding of dispositions to the demands of the new paradigm: the sacrifice of revolutionary principles for a menu of research grants, consensuses or governmental appointments.

There is, of course, no shortage of accounts cast in this vein. Their error, it seems to me, is that, in attributing too much to the effects of the reforms, they fail to take into account the extent in which such governmental interventions into the agendas of universities have tended to reinforce, and to focus more sharply, intellectual tendencies that were already clearly discernible pre-Dawkins and which have a much broader horizon.

If these tendencies have a common direction, it is in their impetus toward working in the present; that is, toward forms of intellectual work that are capable of making calculable and appreciable contributions to the modernisation, programs and endeavours. As such they also have a common aversion to intellectual work which, in the name of an overriding commitment to research, appears to have put some future point in time, necessarily casts work which concerns itself with the exigencies of the here and now at compromised and compromising.

This shift of emphasis and orientation has been easier to effect in some fields of inquiry than others. In my own - the field of cultural studies - we have been better off than those that cannot dispense with presently available forms of intellectual and political work that are aimed equally at the production of sociological intellectuals and, first and foremost, in the capacity of forces or principles of a higher order: means, universal history, community, or culture itself. Given this political momentum, the work that has been associated with this field has been almost conclusively inclined to overlap: presence previously available practised and political agendas to which intellectual work might simply be applied. It is this, we might conclude, that will witness the future set of relations where knowledge - uncountenanted by any interference from the present - will somehow magically become practical once again.

Terry Eagleton's recent appreciation of Raymond Williams - one of the more influentially ﬁguring cultural studies - helps underwrite the point I am after here. Remarkably, apropos Williams' Welsh background, that he'd 'known what community could be, and would not rest until it was recreated on an international scale.' Eagleton goes on to observe that it was precisely the depth of Williams' experience of community and its peremptory potential that explained 'why it would not have occurred to him to lend himself for possible political partisanship which, twenty or even ten years ago, would have occupied a well-thumbed position at the front of most of our shelves but which, subsequently, had been edged to the back and sometimes out of sight, no longer in regular use.

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Two kinds of accountability

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Perhaps the most striking feature of the academic response to the NEER report was the clear theme that the report's main objective was the manipulation of the university criteria of what might seem to be traditional views of academic autonomy and of the broader social purposes served by higher education. The report's task was to express the disinterested pursuit of knowledge while others assessed the cultural developments of the individual or the nation. It was also suggested that the system of higher education and research oriented to short-term instrumental objectives may not have the flexibility to respond to as yet unknown future demands. These points were often taken to suggest that government should continue to provide adequate funding and leave the academic and research communities to get on with the job as they saw it. The implication was that the various social purposes of higher education and research would best be served by leaving decisions in the hands of the academic community itself.

In fact, the idea of autonomy and the various social goals invoked in its defence are somewhat amorphous. In the absence of careful specification they are hardly conducive to clear argumentation - as many contributions to the debate on higher education demonstrated all too clearly. Furthermore, the implied claim that the purposes of higher education would best be served by the autonomy of academic institutions as they presently stood took little account of the structural imperatives of the existence of considerable disaffection with the conduct of academic affairs within various sections of the academic community itself.

If it is claimed that universities perform important social functions then it is difficult to argue that they should not be held responsible for the performance of those functions. While it is possible to argue that academic work should be autonomous in certain respects in the academic community and those within it might hold it to be responsible, and therefore accountable, for their activities. The first part of this paper examines the idea of accountability and of the scrutiny of institutions in terms of their performance while the second comments on some of the more widespread and clearly specified measures of performance as a means of evaluating achievements in terms of desired results. These assumptions are in no way peculiar to Australia or to discussion of higher education. They can be found throughout the reports of OECD societies and they are applied quite generally to public spending programs.

Accountability

Discussion of what should happen in higher education and research takes place in the context of perceived shortage of public funds, which is usually taken to imply that there is a need to establish priorities for public spending. It is also widely agreed that recipients of public funds should be accountable for the uses of those funds. This is an aspect of the accountability of funding agencies as requiring a focus on outcomes and in the use of facilities. I'm holding on to my library materials and the broader social purposes of higher education and research.

The assumption that research and higher education should be accountable can also be extended to other activities in terms of which they might be assessed and the standards and measures that might be appropriate. This paper concentrates on how and that this is to say, having posed questions relating to the conditions under which accountability should be given. It suggests that the problem with the White Paper is not that it is proposed that universities accountable but rather that it took too a restricted view of the relevant constituencies and that its specific proposals focused too narrowly a range of objectives and procedures.

Two kinds of accountability

Two broad senses of accountability to ... are particularly relevant to the discussion of public spending programs: one involves formally constituted relations between superior and subordinate and the other involves some more general sense of responsibility to a constituency or public.

1 Accountability to a superior

Perhaps the most clearly understood sense of "accountability to ..." appears in the context of formally constituted hierarchic accountability. These relations commonly identify one party as superior and the other as subordinate. The superior in question may be an employer, ministerial government department or educational institution, or an agent of any of these. The subordinate may be any person, organization or unit required to account to such a superior. Superiority here is not a matter of the personal qualities of the individuals concerned but rather of their occupation of the appropriate position in an hierarchical and formal structure. In other words, the claim is made that people are accountable to another for their conduct which is called to account by the other. Accountability might be oriented either towards behaviour, a matter of appropriate conduct in the performance of duties, or towards achievement, a matter of outputs or results - or towards some combination of the two.

In August 1988 a joint working party of the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee and the Australian Council of Directors and Principals (AVC/ACDP) issued a Preliminary Report on Performance Indicators. The Working Party clearly regarded the notion of accountability as an essential feature of public funding. It was both appropriate to academic institutions. While the introduction to the Report comments that the accountability of higher education should be accountable and more transparent to public scrutiny, the body of the report is organized around the following assumption:

"In making an evaluation of the state of an academic activity, whether on a national or a local scale, the question is simply: 'Is the institutional framework and the body of work performed under it responsible and effective?' The question is not: 'Is the institution or academic unit healthy or not, is rather analogous to that by which a medical judgment is arrived at concerning the health of an individual; a person is pronounced healthy if various measures of important bodily functions are within normal limits. Whether the process of regular evaluation, an important aspect is the determination of the