Quality and traditional university values: Policy development through consultation

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Autonomy without responsibility and accountability is subject to erosion and retraction. (Dressel & Fairley)

Introduction

Changes dictated by the Federal Government’s quality agenda (Higher Education Council, 1992), Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 1993) pose threats to university autonomy and academic freedom as well as challenges for institutional policy development and policy implementation. The Government’s resolve to encourage and reward universities for the demonstrable quality of their operations is pressuring universities to develop, implement and evaluate new management frameworks. All this is taking place in a context where there is widespread dissatisfaction about what quality actually means in Australian universities (see, for example, Lindsay, 1992; Petit 2, 1992) and confusion about current policy and its implementation (Cannon, 1993).

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom have been fundamental values of Western universities. They have also been something of a continuing battleground between universities and governments (Russell, 1993). Part of the reason for this ‘battle’ is a perception in society and by governments that universities are not as accountable as they should be, particularly in an environment where the universities are claiming increasing amounts of public revenue. Present debates about quality, particular accountability and responsibility, are a lack of institutional responsiveness to repeated criticisms of the quality of university teaching. Such criticisms date back at least to the Murray Report of 1957 (Report of the Committee on Australian Universities, 1957).

The paper proceeds from four assumptions:

1. There are challenges to academic freedom and autonomy arising from the Federal Government’s ‘quality agenda’;
2. The search for and development of academic freedom is of value to modern universities.
3. As a consequence, they are values worth protecting;
4. A fourth, consultation builds on and strengthens traditions of collegiality and open and positive strategies for promoting the values of autonomy and freedom.

The paper examines the nature of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, the interaction between the pressures for quality and autonomy, and finally a way in which the universities might engage the interaction through consultation with their members.

Australian universities, institutional autonomy and academic freedom

Australian universities have a history of being criticised for some form of complacency too close to the immediate demands placed on them by the other social actors (Enel, 1965). Enel argues that

... any substantial improvement to their (universities) situations should be seen as an attempt to resist the pressures for ‘economies of scale’ in the ‘autonomous’ and cultural as well as purely instrumental (Enel, 1965, p.23).

The University is invested with full juridical capacity and unfettered discretion in matters of education; to conduct its affairs in such manner as it thinks fit. (The University of Adelaide, p.14)

On the other hand, the State has intervened in many ways in the affairs of the university, in order to ensure or maintain a level of educational quality and to protect the public interest in such matters as the safety of students and the conduct of its employees. (The University of Adelaide, p.14)

An example of an intrusion into academic freedom to conduct research is contained in the Sixth Report of the Higher Education Council:

This important element of institutional autonomy is the right of universities to govern themselves. It has been taken to include an academic freedom which enables each university to determine whom and how, as well as permitting them to decide, broadly, (to) what topics or themes to research. (Higher Education Council, 1993, p.5).

Mobility is a trait by which, prejudice, conservatism and intolerance of innovation of the academic guilds led to legislative action that not only impeded the sequel. It is argued that the University of Adelaide and Gordon University to the form of new fields of study that had been resisted by the academic community. To that end, the University of Adelaide proposed a number of changes in its curriculum policies, such as plans for new programs in the arts and social sciences.

The University of Adelaide is a small research university, and it is one of the more prominent examples of the role of academic freedom in the pursuit of learning and in acting as critics of social policy and by those who are interested in the university.

Finally, there has been an untrammelled element of competition and secretiveness between institutions of higher education. In fact, the quality of university teaching is often judged on the basis of the number and prestige of publications, and this has led to a competition for the most prestigious journals and the most prestigious universities.

In summary, the position argued here is that the Higher Education Council, which seems to be that universities have a greater degree of autonomy than ever before. This is the case.

Challenges to academic freedom and autonomy in teaching

There are, however, a number of challenges that we are experiencing a time when traditional university universities for freedom, autonomy and research are not being challenged. The reasons for the ‘challenge’ are many; they may have their origins both in the internal affairs and administration of the universities and in the external environment.

Whether the universities would, or could, respond to pressures for change is not only an issue of concern, but a question of concern, too. The fact is that they did not respond to the pressures of the universities, but rather, the reverse occurred, and the universities began to exercise greater control over the teaching and research processes.

What are the challenges to external actions and where do they come from? The following are a few examples.

First, a challenge to achieve higher quality educational processes and outcomes. This challenge is mediated by government-appointed bodies such as the Higher Education Council;
Second, quite specific challenges to what to teach that now go beyond the boundaries of the professional and learned societies. Examples include the idea of 'generic' skills (coming from industry, trade unions and government) (Higher Education Council, 1993). Third, challenges to traditional bodies of knowledge, including universities in general and the academic and other characteristics of science. This challenge is partly embedded, for example, in the credit transfer system.

Fourth, challenges to the ways students are taught and what they are taught to orientate in state equal opportunity and affirmative action legislation, and change in the economic and social demands and modes of acceptable behaviour;

Fifth, challenges to the 'status' of academic staff and the differentiation of teaching responsibilities between the various levels of appointment in industrial awards. For a Lecturer at Level 2, for example, there are specific teaching duties in two research duties, one of which involves the supervision of research students and is therefore, arguably, a teaching duty anyway, two administrative duties and one professional duty.

Whatever the intrinsic merit or worth of these challenges, they are challenges, nevertheless. Although most come from outside the universities, it is significant that university staff play an important role in both the development and the mediation of these challenges through the academic and disciplinary bodies of various professional committees, government councils and advisory boards.

The newly generated challenges to autonomy have not been addressed in detail here as they stand outside the broad scope of this paper. However, these challenges are significant. They include, for example, institutional limitations on consultation, the formal regulation of relationships between members of the university community, institutional proposals for increased student performance, and postgraduate student supervision regulations.

Building the 'counterweighting' force

How can universities and their staff be assisted to address external imperatives and threats to their autonomy? How can the universities, to use Enelow's phrase 'build up', as a counterweighting force, the autonomous functions which they are supposed to perform?

There are two responses to these questions. The first is for them to discharge their function of education responsibly and well against their own declared values (or to use the current language, 'with a high degree of quality'). The second is to ensure that conference setting and seminars of scholars to exercise their responsibilities in constructive ways.

Responsibility

Of course, these responses beg many questions. What is responsibility? "To owe, "one's debt," is the traditional view, who have responsibility? Who will judge and set the standards for doing things "well"?

Exercising responsibility imposes obligations on the individual and the university, on the individual to act responsibly and on the university to enable the individual to act responsibly. The Higher Education Council expressed this view of responsibility in its Seventh Report to the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (Higher Education Council, 1993, p.5). The Council states:

If it is true that freedom to govern and manage . . . lies at the heart of democracy, it is equally true that freedom of action is limited by the duties and obligations relating to the use of public funds is the best means of securing that autonomy. Indeed, these obligations include regular and public demonstration that the affairs of the institution are governed and managed properly.

Responsibility does not imply that universities should respond to every policy idea and demand placed on them by society. One such demand is the increasing pressure on universities to ensure that students are responsive to 'customer' (student?) expectations for all services, including teaching. Nevertheless, universities need to be attentive to emerging ideas and repeated demands and consider their position in relation to those and their own traditional and historically

This view is confirmed by emerging evidence of policy implementation, although this evidence is no means conclusive. It is a view that requires more systematic investigation especially in light of the wide diversity in difficulties in policy implementation (H Bakewell, 1987).

The consultative process: An example

An example of the consultative process is outlined. The example describes a special Adelaide project to develop in an approach to policy development in the quality of teaching and learning.

The principles of this approach were used successfully in a previous project. It was highly inclusive and innovative, and it involved the participation of a wide range of people. It was conducted through an extensive series of meetings in the University of Adelaide and involved a large number of people.

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Use of peer review by the Australian Research Council

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Introduction

National bodies responsible for allocating funds for basic research differ in the manner in which they employ peer review (see Chibnall & Hackett, 1990). Some funding agencies, such as the Research Councils in the United Kingdom and the National Institute of Health in the United States, establish expert panels for each of a large number of narrowly defined research specializations. Applications for funding within each specialization are reviewed only by panel members. Other agencies also employ a panel system, but decisions as to which applications will be funded typically are made only after the panel has considered evaluations provided by reviewers who are not members of the panel. The National Science Foundation in the United States and the Australian Research Council employ this latter approach, although in different ways.

Peer review is concerned with the place of peer review in the process by which the Australian Research Council (ARC) allocates funds under the Large Grants Scheme. Awards under the Australian Research Council Grants Scheme constitute the primary source of funding for basic research in Australia in disciplines other than medicine and dentistry (where the National Health and Medical Research Council is the responsible body). Policy directives for higher education issued by the Australian Government in 1988 (see Dawkins, 1988), including centralizing control through a process known as "clawback" over funds once distributed by universities, increased the influence of the ARC. In 1992 the ARC had a research funding budget of $255.5 million, of which $96.1 million were committed to research grants, $55 million to postgraduate awards, and $51.6 million to research infrastructure. $20.2 million to special research centres and key centres, and $17.7 million to research fellowships. Although universities are responsible for responding to ARC research grants and the Small Grants Scheme ($15.7 million were distributed in 1992 to 412 applicants, with a success rate of 35%), the primary allocation of the $96.1 million is undertaken by ARC through the Large Grants Scheme. Only 19% of all applications for awards for the Large Grants Scheme were successful in 1992. Only, of all applications for awards for the Large Grants Scheme in 1992 were successful, in comparison to success rates of 20% for 1992 and 31% for 1991. This circumstance arose because the number of applications for initial support increased sharply at a time when funding overall remained stable and the ARC was committed to providing continued support for projects funded in earlier years.

The investigation of the ARC and the Large Grant Lodger program is an application which is evaluated by a discipline panel or a priority panel established by ARC. Under the present system each application that survives initial calling is sent by the panel to four assessors for evaluation. As well as having access to such peer review, the panel invites the 40% of applicants surviving the second calling for comment on assessors' reports before deciding which projects should be funded. Wilson (1990), when chairperson of the Research Grants Committee, the body within the ARC responsible for funding under the Large Grants Scheme, noted, "The considerable increase in competition for research funding by Australian academic institutes means it is now even more important that the allocation of..."