Steering at what distance? The political economy of equity, diversity and quality in the August 1993 Higher Education Budget Statement

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Abstract

The 1993 Higher Education Budget Statement restated and adjusted the Dawkins agenda for Australian higher education to the circumstances of the mid-1990s. This paper addresses the implications of its provisions for equity, diversity and quality, and the larger political and economic imperatives which drove them. It also draws on current models of the governance of public and private systems to examine the ways in which the Federal government has imposed accountability mechanisms on higher education institutions which remain largely the responsibility of the various States which also retain substantial institutional autonomy.

Growth, equity and the economic base: A Labourist dilemma

The Federal Labour Government's intentions for higher education from Dawkins (1987, 1988) on have been re-emphasized many times. Put briefly, higher education was to make a key contribution to "the national goals of industrial development and economic reconstrucuring." To this end, it was to be restructured into "a unified national system" with "fewer and larger institutions" each of which would be funded by the Commonwealth on the basis of its mission statement and an educational profile which would include as its objectives, teaching activities, research student, gradudate activities and management plans, and a "statement of intent as measures to achieve priorities, including equity." To this, "performance indicators" were also to be developed. Institutional amalgamations would enable economies of scale and better educational provision, thus combining "educational effectiveness and financial efficiency." The higher education student intake was to be greatly increased, particularly in areas which would contribute to national economic growth. Part of the extra cost would be paid for graduate and industry contributions (through this last item was changed to a "training levy") while the marker for full-time students would be greatly extended. Access and equity goals for "full participation" of "disadvantaged groups" in Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, woman, people with lower incomes or from rural areas, "some migrant groups" and "the disabled" were supported for economic as well as democratic reasons (Dawkins 1988). This program signalled the neocorporativist (as contrasted with, for example, neo-liberal) interventions of a residually social democratic or Labourist party in power during a post-Keynesian period of global and national economic recession.

At issue are several crucial challenges for such a government: How can a national-service provide adequate "social wage" without an adequate fiscal base? How can it provide a range of social services without impinging economic recovery? How much can and should education contribute to the construction of a competitive economy?

How indeed can an economic recovery be managed by the state? How, in the Australian situation, on a Federal state manage and direct an economic and the social wage when many of the functions its seeks to control are constitutionally located with its individual States? And "Finally, how can a middled-level nation state control and build a national education economy in a situation where capital operates globally and the international "playing field" is most certainly not level?" As Masten and Stanley (1994) point out, the genius of the Federal Labor "solution" initiated by Dawkins and continued by Beazley and Garnier with regard to higher education, constitutionally the prerogatives of the States, can be seen in its greatly expanded provision at least financial cost in a period of continuing and turbulent economic conditions in such a situation, "targeted support", "institutional profiles" and "quality reviews" have a certain face validity. At the same time, however, they signify a managerialist and instrumentalist approach to higher education which is going some way towards transforming universities into semi-autonomous, yet corporate and market-oriented enterprises. The consequent tensions between Federal regulatory and deregulatory impulses (cf. Henry 1992, Taylor & Henry 1994) constitute a continuing and intractable policy problematic for a Labor government in the 1990s. This is the setting in which this paper addresses the provisions for access, diversity and quality as outlined in the 1993 Higher Education Budget Statement.

Completing the White paper reforms?

The August 1993 Higher Education Budget Statement by the then Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Mr Beazley, may be seen as signifying the view of the Federal Labor Government that, apart from minor modifications and working adjustments "on the move", the work of reforming the higher education sector which began with the Dawkins Green and White Papers and the Brait report was now largely complete. In 1994 it was claimed that the Dawkins agenda for Australian higher education to the circumstances of the mid-1980s, recycling themes and phrases from earlier documents, including the Baldwina White Paper (1991), Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s. The various changes to finding provisions for higher education since the 1993 Budget have not substantially altered the broad thrust of its intentions or the parameters of the political economy of Australian higher education which were laid down in the Dawkins era. (It may be significant that there was no specific document published for higher education from the May 1994 Budget).

The Commonwealth government could thus shift focus to address more fully the challenges of other sector of postsecondary education, research, training, which, had it been set in train by the Dawkins Report, the National Training Board, the Film/Video/ Carribean trilogy, and the establishment of the Australian National...
Training Authority. This interpretation is supported by the exemplary issue of the 1993 document: Since the foundations for expansion of the higher education system were laid in the 1990s, Australia has experienced an increase in enrolments in universities and an increase in the quality of education. This has been evident in the increase in the number of students and the quality of teaching. Additionally, the government has implemented policies to improve the quality of education. The government has introduced a funding formula for higher education that is based on student numbers. This has led to an increase in the quality of education, which has been reflected in the quality of graduates.

From access to outcomes: The limits to growth in the 1990s

What then of the 1993 Higher Education Budget Statement? It begins with a recognition that "to enhance learning and teaching and training effectiveness and to provide greater opportunities for students seeking to continue higher education for the first time," the government is proposing to increase funding for higher education. The 1993 budget statement states that "the government has increased funding for higher education by an additional $1.2 billion in 1994.

The budget proposes that the increase in funding will be used to: (1) increase the number of places available in higher education, (2) increase the quality of teaching, and (3) increase the attractiveness of higher education for participants.

The budget statement also highlights that the government is committed to ensuring that the benefits of higher education are open to all. This is reflected in the government's commitment to increasing student numbers and improving the quality of teaching.

The budget statement emphasizes that the government is committed to improving the quality of education by focusing on the following areas:

1. Increasing the number of places available in higher education
2. Improving the quality of teaching
3. Increasing the attractiveness of higher education for participants

In conclusion, the 1993 budget statement is a key document in the history of higher education in Australia. It demonstrates the government's commitment to improving the quality of education and increasing access to higher education for all students.

Face increasing difficulty in financing their operations. They have, in short, to broaden their income sources. What follows in terms of student aid has been well documented. De-}

Now, there are two main forms of access to mass higher education. One is "universal" (access is "free" or "affordable") and the other is "selective" (access is "paid for" or "costly"). The former is characterized by mass access to education, while the latter is characterized by selectivity.

The implementation of the universal access policy has been challenging. The government has been faced with the need to balance the need for mass access with the need for quality education. This has led to the development of policies that aim to ensure that all students have access to higher education, while also maintaining high standards of education.

The government has introduced a range of policies to achieve this goal. These include the introduction of the Higher Education Commission (HEC), which is responsible for overseeing the delivery of higher education and ensuring that it meets the needs of society.

Australia's universities are a major contributor to the nation's economy. They play a vital role in training the workforce and producing research that drives innovation. The government has recognized this and has invested heavily in the expansion of higher education.

In conclusion, the government's commitment to improving the quality of education and increasing access to higher education for all students is a key aspect of its policy. This commitment is reflected in the government's budget statements and other policy documents. The government continues to be committed to improving the quality of education and increasing access to higher education for all students.

Access, diversity, quality: Some desiderata

The first line of the Budget statement describes the overall objective of the government's budget: "The Budget supports the government's commitment to improving the quality of education and increasing access to higher education for all students.

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The second measure acknowledges higher education's contribution to national development and "the needs of the economy" through the general process of development, as well as its role in developing the transmission of knowledge in undergraduate studies. However, rather than a general overview, government support will be targeted where it is most needed. This is because higher education is not a "once-for-all" investment, but also in terms of the track records of the researchers themselves and the students. Postgraduate students are therefore encouraged to apply for support. Furthermore, postgraduate awards, ICDs and research funding will be granted on a competitive basis with respect to institutional "areas of strength," "research endowments," the "postgraduate education environment," and a "composite index" of their research activities, grants and so on. A "correlation" of "diversification" of "roles" and hence "dual roles" will be assigned, teaching strategies, and research activities is encouraged. The intention that some (presumably major) institutions would take on a "teaching" role and others a "research" role seems reasonable. However, this is neither prescribed nor legislated.

Further provisions in this area include the continuation of support for "the establishment of a national system of the rationalization of a range of postgraduate awards and ICDs exemptions into the one Australian Postgraduate Awards Scheme; and the need for postgradua-

To provide greater scope for institutions to develop market opportun-

Seizing at the distance: The loose-tie principle

The relationship between a Federal Government and the granting of high education institutions which, while they are incorporated under the legislation of the States and Territories, are considered to possess a reason-

The looseness of the "tie" principle is indicative of the framing of social justice intentions without overtly infringing a constitutional or administrative "marrow." The loose-tie principle aims to provide institutions with greater autonomy and accountability while maintaining a budgetary commitment to the Commonwealth. The looseness of the "tie" principle is an attempt to strike a balance between institutional and government interests. However, it is important to note that the looseness of the "tie" principle is not an absolute solution to institutional autonomy. The looseness of the "tie" principle can be viewed as a means to achieve institutional and government objectives, but it is not a substitute for a comprehensive approach to institutional autonomy.


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Abstrac

Universities have been marketised. The spurge in promotional activities provides evidence of this. Considerable attention is now given to the corporate image of universities. In the competition for an increased market share, a range of educational activities, be it conferences, students, endowments, research dollars, promotional activity as seen in strategic university advertising is an such activity, and its analysis can provide insights into the divisions emerging in Australia’s system of higher education. The advertising directed at prospective students is especially revealing in terms of these divisions: in addition, it reveals the degree to which university education has become commodified.

The bourgeois spirit which with Handel and Arnold invested the nineteenth century university have become promotional ideals (Wernick, 1991).

Wounds of change sweep through our universities, replacing ivory towers with concrete boxes, making them more accountable in every sense of the word and their plight more severe to market forces. They have been unified, privatised and corporatised, and saddled contributing to the economic needs of the nation (Kurz, 1991; Margison, 1993; Long, 1993). In this sense, universities have been subjected to the same sorts of economic rationalisation applied to other areas of the public sector as a totalitarian response to the fiscal exigencies of national state capital and which has resulted in the partial privatisation of many public goods and services (Payne 1991). Massification now dominates the pursuits of scholarship, teaching and research, and the discourse of accountability as applied to the corporate world has become the vernacular of the university. Clients, stakeholders, customers are all part of this commodification of private enterprise. What was an enterprise of culture now displays the features of an enterprise in which education as a commodity and like any other commodity is subject to the discipline of the principles of advertising.

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Although it is never written in this paper, one can see this as part of a broader affirmation of market forces and the assumption, dubious in the extreme, that they have the power to enhance the quality of education, to mediate on the recent reformation, universities were not too much in the public spotlight and when they were it was adverse publicity they received, in fact, as is the handicap of student radicalism, when university campuses were pictured as places where the morality and politics were pervasive and libertine. This illusion perpetuated by the mass media might include the fact that universities were still places of elitism and privilege, whose graduates enjoyed the prospect of a secure future, and when a university credential was a valid asset in the labour market. To this must be added the fact that the quality of a degree is not an institutional phenomenon that counted. What ‘pecking orders’ there existed among the pre-Dawkins universities were mainly centred on the arms of the alma mater with most status and prestige attendant on the older universities, and least on the newer and more provincial universities and the now extinct CAILs. What promotional mechanisms these were tended to be informal, and were reliant on the informal and often unstructured corporate image of the university being converted into a more solid public consciousness. Nothing more forceful than this, was the ‘idea’ of the university’s image of itself. It is like ‘crying to it’ (O’Driscoll 1987), which was at loggerheads with the image of a university as a place of privilege and assured standing in a culture’s language, where the distinct pursuit of scholarship was protected, lest the spirit of free enterprise compromise academic freedom.

As that era recedes into a history cloaked with mystique, and is replaced by an era of “maximising” tertiary education, university education no longer offers secure prospects. While the historic mission of universities may be to launch economic recovery for “the clever country”, their students are more immediately confronted with the need to pay for their education and debt when they leave the University. An unexpected rise in tertiary enrolments over the last decade (Mash 1993) means over the next five years or some half a million graduates will be job seekers in what is already an employer’s market. Competition is the overriding imperative amongst students seeking employment and also amongst universities chasing funds and “entrepreneurial” opportunities. In such a context, the purpose of an institution and the differences to which it makes claim on its needs become powerful attractions to the pursuit of enrolments and student numbers. That we have come to accept that universities like any other service or industry advertise themselves, in part, reflects a context in which the reverse base of the university is no longer fully dependent upon government intervention but must be fought for also in the market. But, it also reflects a context in which the promotion of institutions is CORPORATION in the public sector, has become the norm in Australia and indeed across the world (Dawson 1992; Fairbrother 1993).

In a massified market, it is imperative that prospective students see that attendance at a particular university confers position advantages on them over other graduates or will result in the acquisition of a qualification recognised by employers as exhibiting more workplace utility. One of the functions of university advertising and "promoting", particularly that directed at matriculating students, is to make visible these advantages and provide a clear set of identity markers that differentiate this institution from others and embeds it in the social reality whereby a degree from a university confers superior occupational opportunities. Fred Hirsch’s notion of “pragmatic good” (1977), which roughly translates as “everyone stands on the top, no one sees any better”, provides a useful way of understanding the dynamics of scarcity in relation to public goods like education (Margison 1993; Hollis 1987). Higher education is in an absolute scarcity in the sense that works of art, its scarcity is relative and "incidental" as access to it is subject to expansion, as has happened in Australia over the last decade, or contraction. As more and more Australians stand on the tip of higher education, so the positional advantage gained through an undergraduate qualification is decreased. In such an environment, where institutions are forced to compete for students in an otherwise undifferentiated and congested market, the way institutions are promoted, particularly when their funding depends upon student numbers, becomes a strategic element in student recruitment. As a university education becomes more available and its rate of exchange grows more dependent on financial pressure, it becomes imperative that universities seek to preserve their enrolments through influencing market choice in their favour.