

Diversity and excellence: prompts from the history of the tertiary education sector

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In 2010, fifty years after the establishment of the association now called Adult Learning Australia (ALA), the association still faces the dilemma about how to sell its message that adult learning matters. The dilemma is one of philosophy: in the nineteenth century, it was liberalism versus utilitarianism; in the mid-twentieth, the instrumental versus cultural; today, the dichotomy is couched in terms such as ‘social inclusion’ versus ‘productivity’.

The tension goes back to the very early days of white Australia’s approach to adult education. Here, I offer an historical perspective on the development of tertiary education—itself a disputed term, but one which can embrace all types of formal education that occurs after secondary school—in Australia. My hope is that a better understanding of this evolution will help identify issues we need to

discuss as we move towards a more integrated tertiary education sector. These issues are essentially about the purpose and value of adult education, matters at the heart of Adult Learning Australia's remit.

This paper is also the further airing of my argument that history needs to be better represented in the mix of policy development (Beddie 2007). Otis Graham (1991), in an analysis of what the history of immigration to America might tell current policy-makers, lists three ways in which the historian can advise. The first is the admonition to stop thinking in any particular way. The second is to remind that situations are never exactly the same—examples are easy to lift from the historical record, but are only useful if properly examined. Instead, the past helps us to find the right questions to ask—it does not offer the answers.

Take the first point about changing perspective: the history of the development of adult education and the tertiary sector suggest to me that we must think differently about the benefits of education and not assume that more and higher qualifications for our people is the progressive way.

While there are similarities between current approaches to education and the mix of the liberal and the vocational in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there are no easy solutions offered by the past. There are, however, lessons to be learned as we try to find the best way to nurture the innovative and creative workers our economy and society is calling for.

It is worth remembering, as the historian of adult education Derek Whitelock did that, despite the rich history of mechanics' institutes and strong tradition of adult education in the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and elsewhere, for many Australians, education was not regarded the golden key to success it was in nineteenth century Britain. The rather erratic campaigner for education, Henry

Parkes, summed up the pragmatism that prevailed: ‘we are practical people... and have little affection for the ideal and the imaginative; and we are also rather proud of this defect in our national character’ (Whitelock 1974: 129–130). Perhaps many still are.

Before emigrating to Australia, Henry Parkes, a bone and ivory turner by trade, attended a mechanics’ institute in Birmingham. On offer that year, 1835, were lectures on the manners of the ancient Romans, improved cultivation, physiology and music in the age of Elizabeth (Martin 1962: 9–10). That mix of the liberal and vocational would not be misplaced in an ACE provider’s offerings today. The difference is that now we would not speak about education as a civilising agent used to curb the excesses of the working class or, as G.K. Holden, a president of the Sydney Mechanics Institute of Arts in the 1860s, put it:

... the people may thus be rendered not only a harmless, but a highly beneficial channel of political power (Hyde 1982: 109).

Today, non-vocational adult learning is more likely to be portrayed as beneficial for the individual’s health or community well-being, as a contribution to social capital rather than societal order.

For the state it was and remains the utilitarian or vocational goals of education that are most important. Today, this preoccupation with high-level skills leading to greater productivity threatens the homogenisation of our educational system, especially at the tertiary level. I fear this push is more likely to result in credentialism than a well-skilled workforce and thoughtful citizenry. The official target is 40 percent of all 25–34 year olds with a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025. To put this in perspective, at the time of Federation in 1901, fewer than 0.07 percent of the population attended university; and by the outbreak of the Second World War the figure was 0.2 percent (Gallagher 1993: 1).

Here I think that what is sometimes portrayed as the ‘glorious failure’ of the mechanics institutes / schools of art is instructive. Roger Morris, a stalwart of Adult Learning Australia, has disputed this interpretation, arguing that while they did not educate the artisan in the scientific principles underpinning his trade, as had been their founding purpose, the second wave of schools did achieve more modest goals to provide ‘a local home for reading, learning, culture, civil society and recreation’ (in particular billiards!). In so doing, he is championing the cause of lifelong learning, the liberal rather than utilitarian ideal of education, which has defined the adult education movement in Australia (Morris 2003: 161).

But should these views be at odds? Did those who attended the schools of art to study art rather than anatomy have no inkling that such learning might be beneficial to their working as well as their social lives? Is not the lack of knowledge of our history, grammar and philosophy part of the problem lurking in the call for greater attention to nurturing soft skills, literacy and creative ability? Is it not possible that Parkes’ brush with the Romans stood him in good stead when he embarked on a political life? As Otis Graham says, history throws up plenty of questions.

These suggest one answer might be to champion the cause of the humanities, as a means to skill the nation and meet the Council of Australian Governments’ targets. Although a glut in Latin speakers may not address the skills shortages the mining industry is facing, it might meet some of the demand for people capable of critical thinking, good writing and speaking, skills which are most certainly vocational. The question then becomes how these skills are delivered, and where: at university, in TAFEs or community colleges?

Such questions are hardly new. Universities have offered vocational courses like law and medicine since the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, professionalisation saw the emergence of separate disciplines. Many humanities subjects were relegated

to an academic setting, with other more applied arts degrees (social work, for example), the ones seen as relevant to the real world (Schuhmacher nd: 2).

The divide was also blurred in Australia where, as Jim Hyde (1982) argued (in the neo-Marxist language of his time), the development of higher education reflected conflicts between the squattocracy and the emergent urban industrial middle class—with the latter prevailing. That meant the universities, albeit conservative, were preoccupied with turning out professional men not scholars (p. 108). But even then, with mining and agriculture the main sources of the nation's earnings, less value was placed on higher education than was the case in places like Germany which relied on technology. Indeed, as I have set out elsewhere, until late in the nineteenth century when the economy saw a downturn, Australian industry looked to importing skilled labour rather than training their own (Beddie, forthcoming). There remains something of this tendency.

The mid-twentieth century Australian attitude to tertiary education is pertinent to the current situation, in which we see a remarkable wave of cooperation between public VET providers and the universities, spurred by the last government's response to the Bradley review of higher education and resulting Council of Australian Governments' targets. After decades of much effort to create pathways for students wishing to move between the two—for little return—these policies have sprouted all sorts of new possibilities, including plans for a considerable expansion of higher education in TAFE and, at some universities, more offerings of school and VET qualifications as well as auspicing arrangements. Will this new-found collaboration impart the right education to Australian adults? This is a question Adult Learning Australia might inject into the debate.

The first major expansion of higher education in Australia occurred after World War Two. It was a response to the demands of a war economy and then the push for post-war reconstruction. One long-

time observer and player in Australian education, P.H. Partridge, explained—it seems with some regret—the character of Australian higher education:

If Australian universities have appeared to be exceptionally utilitarian or vocational in spirit, this is mainly due to the character of the society they served. It is a society lacking a wealthy class with a background of education or culture; hence few students have entered the universities for the sake of the intellectual life they could live there. It is a society which has been on the whole anti-intellectual; not able to see clearly the value of thought or scholarship or scientific enquiry unconnected with concrete social and economic advantages, nervous about argument and speculation which seemed to clash with moral, religious and social orthodoxies, quick to resent professional pronouncements which question vested group interests; and generally inclined to regard the intellectual as a creature apart (quoted in Hyde 1982: 110–111).

The point Partridge was making perhaps still needs to be made: it is that the Australian public has never been particularly receptive to slogans about learning for learning's sake. It expects a concrete return on its investment in education, a sentiment politicians must heed and which has made Adult Learning Australia's job all the more difficult.

From 1956 to 1966 the number of universities in Australia grew from nine to fourteen; the student population in universities trebled, and the proportion of the gross domestic product allocated to universities by governments in the form of grants doubled (Gallagher 1993). But by the sixties this expenditure caused a rethink, as articulated by Prime Minister Menzies to the Chairman of Australian Universities Commission, L.H. Martin, in November 1960:

The Government is by no means sure that this state of things—more and more students requiring proportionately more and more outlay—can proceed indefinitely. On the contrary, it is our view that the money which would be required is very likely to be completely out of reach. Therefore, the Cabinet takes the view that, beginning now and over the next 12 to 18 months, the most

vital task of the Commission will be to address itself, and find solutions, to the problems of providing the necessary amount of tertiary education within financial limits which are very much more modest than under our present university system (Davies 1989: 33).

One has to wonder if a similar rethink may take place when the implications of the entitlement system put forward in the Bradley Report and accepted by the government become clear. Certainly, Professor Vin Massaro (2009) foreshadowed this problem in his early response to the Bradley Report:

An unlimited number of student entitlements is unlikely to get past Treasury because it would constitute a blank cheque with no precise controls over the quality of the product. The Report suggests that any student who can find an institution that is prepared to offer him or her a place would have an entitlement to enrol in that place—there is an assumption that all institutions will have minimum entry standards and rigorous progression rules and that no institution would attempt to game the system by enrolling all-comers in the interests of access and equity. Treasury is unlikely to be quite so trusting with its money.

Massaro goes on to suggest:

Perhaps one of the unintended consequences of the Bradley Report is that we create a new binary system with most of the new places in new colleges or dual sector TAFE institutions that could offer degrees without aspiring to full university status (i.e. without research). The cost of capital development would be lower and it is likely that staff costs could be reduced as well.

This is pretty much what resulted from the 1960s Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education (Martin Review), which Menzies instigated in order to find a way to supply industry with qualified professionals, while preserving the broad liberal education he valued from universities. The final report presented to parliament in 1965 proffered the view that tertiary education should be available to all who had the capacity to undertake it, and suggested three distinct

categories be developed: universities, colleges or institutes and teacher training facilities (Laming 2001: 247).

These would cater to different groups of students, preserving the elite nature of university, while meeting the needs of the business. The government did not agree to separate teacher training facilities but did support the establishment of non-university tertiary institutions that were to be known as colleges of advanced education (CAEs). This was the first binary system of tertiary education, one which was to strive for a dual system that was ‘equal but different’ (Davies 1989: 36).

It was an approach that did not prevail last century—the Dawkins’ reforms of the late 1980s replaced it with ‘a unified national system’—but may be worth re-considering today as we think again about the place of non-university institutions in the tertiary education sector. And in so doing, we might do well to heed the words of E.L. Wheelwright, who edited a series of papers presented at a seminar on higher and technical education at the University of NSW in 1964. Wheelwright (1965: xvi) called for attention to ‘measures of quality and excellence... to channel our educational ‘revolution’ [his quote marks] from a quantitative to a qualitative phase’.

At that seminar, Sol Encel regretted the vocationalism of higher education, which he thought detracted from the generation of new knowledge. He dubbed universities the ‘service stations’ for government, saying they had become mere training schools for public servants. In his response to the Encel, Partridge counselled realism: ‘the democratisation of the universities is surely bound to accentuate the vocationalist spirit...[and] the policy of encouraging a steadily growing proportion of the young to enter universities ... means... that the university is the gateway to a better sort of job (Wheelwright 1965: 34–35)’. Analysis of 25 years of Australian Bureau of Statistics’ census data confirms that a four-year degree also brings the promise of higher income. For a man graduating in 1981 it was a return on

investment of 13 percent a year; for a woman 18 percent. By 2001, a fresh graduate could expect even more: a lifetime rate of return of 20 percent a year for men and 19 percent for women. In the boom years in the mid-2000s the rate fell back, but was still significant: 15 percent for men and 17 percent for women (ABS 2010).

Such returns underwrite a policy that encourages more people to get the sort of education they need to compete in the labour market. The question we now face is how that education is best organised. Here, Partridge had advice that bears repeating today. In 1965, he thought he was on dangerous ground when offering a view that might offend ‘the love of uniformity and of equality which all of us Australians hold so dear’. It may still be a touchy subject, but we should contemplate his point that higher education needs much greater diversity of character, organisation and aims. Partridge wanted to see institutions that gained a national reputation for doing one or a few things ‘supremely’ well: to become the best liberal arts college or a dedicated undergraduate teaching university or a specialist institute of technology. He went on to argue it would ‘very foolish indeed for all our universities, old and new, to aspire to be eminent either for their post-graduate schools or as centres for research’ (in Wheelwright 1965: 42–43). Striving for diversity and excellence might still be a recipe for success for the future tertiary education sector.

It is here that I return to the role of Adult Learning Australia, an organisation one step removed from the institutional machinations our current policy settings have triggered. From that standpoint, Adult Learning Australia might be able to encourage a discussion about how all these higher qualifications we are aiming for will meet our needs, how best they are taught and in what settings. These are questions that deserve answers before we see a flurry of higher education providers as ‘service stations’ pumping out graduates to meet the targets and competing for dollars. In 2010, we have another opportunity to marry idealism and pragmatism as a way of shaping the way Australia approaches adult education.

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