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SOME COMMENTS ON THE BRADLEY REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

The much anticipated *Review of Australian Higher Education – Final Report* (the “Bradley Review”) was published in December 2008. Overall, it is a very positive document and a timely reminder of the importance of higher education for the future of Australia as we slip down the OECD rankings of educational attainment. Similar comparisons of mainstream sporting achievement would result in a flow of dollars as a quick fix. The extent to which the Commonwealth Government is willing to fund this report’s forty six carefully argued recommendations remains to be seen. There are issues in the report which should concern students as students now and as citizens in the future.

Strengths

Among the strengths of the document are its support of student entitlements (vouchers) which have the potential to empower students (p.xiii), and the idea of a national regulatory framework, including accreditation, instead of the eight current jurisdictional systems, and instead of the self-accrediting status of Australian universities (Chapter 4.1). The former will be opposed by some of the student unions and guilds on the grounds that more student choice could weaken further the weaker universities, and the latter by the universities: the stronger because they will see it as superfluous, and the weaker because it will mean more external benchmarking over and above that already inflicted on them by the Australian Universities Quality Agency. Indeed the report goes further and recommends a tertiary education system (Chapter 4.3) to encompass both higher education and vocational education and training, with a tertiary education student entitlement model. The goal is to prepare a global workforce for the future (p.104).

* While Warrane College accepts responsibility for publishing these papers, the opinions expressed in these papers are those of the authors. Enquiries should be directed to the Master, Warrane College, UNSW, PO Box 123, Kensington, NSW 1465, Australia.

Weaknesses

Before commenting further on this, let me indicate some of the perceived weaknesses. The neglect of university residence issues as an important part of student mobility, student independence, greater equity and participation for under-represented groups, and a broader experience of campus life is missing out on something which could help to provide the glue to bind together some of the recommendations related to these issues. While these might seem too parochial a complaint, the reality is that it has been an increasing battle since the eighties to stop the perception of the government then that university residential colleges are bastions of the wealthy from becoming a reality!

The issues canvassed in the Bradley Review are neither new nor confined to Australia. Forty five years ago, Sir Eric Ashby, then Master of Calre College, Cambridge, wrote that “these groups of scholars, who would not make a decision about the shape of a leaf or the derivation of a word ... without painstakingly assembling the evidence, make decisions about admission policy, size of universities, staff-student ratios, content of courses and similar issues based on dubious assumptions, scrappy data and mere hunch”. Or, in the words of Professor Sir David Watson of the University of London Institute of Education: “Perhaps most significant in all this is the lack of corporate memory: when a policy fails to be assessed against the history of the last time it was tried”!

While recognizing the importance of onshore international education for cultural as well as financial reasons, the place of transnational offshore delivery by Australian institutions needs more systematic regulation – as do local off-main campus city shop front teaching shops! Perhaps the proposed national accreditation authority can address these problems which affect the reputation of Australian higher education.

Targets

There is a proposed national target of at least 40 per cent of 25- to 34- year olds educated to bachelor-level degree or above by 2020, with at least 20 per cent of enrolments from low socio-economic backgrounds. “Vouchers” are at the heart of these tough targets. With voucher funding as part of the deregulation of higher education, all suitably qualified Australian students would be given “learning entitlements” whereby funding would follow the student rather than being allocated to institutions.

The review team canvassed far and wide to give everyone and anyone an opportunity to have a say. It is not surprising “that, overwhelmingly, the contributors to the review consider that the higher education sector is critical for our future”, because those most likely to submit comments have a vested interest to be developed, or at least safeguarded. In itself it does not matter that the comments have come from a captive audience, but for the recommendations of the Report to have traction, the views of those who are indifferent, or even antagonistic to, higher education, cannot be ignored in the context of political decision making.

To take this further, public intellectuals in Australia have to take the values of the academy to the nation as a whole and not just preach to the converted. There is a mono-

culture in our universities which seems to presume that everyone assumes that more and more higher education is good for the nation. Why?

It is here that the Bradley Review has a typical Australian attitude to the philosophy of education – that is, a “blueprint” approach, without asking what is the *raison d’être* for universities in Australia. This same sort of approach can be found in the current documents about a national school curriculum where, for instance, the broad topics in mathematics are outlined without any attempt to answer the more fundamental question of why teach mathematics at all in the Australian high school.

I should add in haste that I do support more higher education and the teaching of mathematics in high school, but my reasons for more funding for higher education and my attitudes to high school mathematics border on the heretical within our intellectual climate! However, these and other fundamental questions have to be answered and the variety of sometimes incompatible answers addressed before lasting reforms, rather than band-aid patch-ups, can be applied to the big issues of society in general and higher education in particular.

Concluding Comments

Why do we need to ask “why” before “what” or “how”? Henry Ergas, Chairman of Concept Economics, put provocatively it this way: “There is no sensible reason why education systems, health systems, or other public services should be the same throughout Australia ... Moreover, if we try to have a uniform approach, the risk is that we will eliminate the best and – in the most optimistic outcome – end up with a watered down version of the worst”. (“Why We Need to Revive Federalism”, *Quadrant*, December 2008, pp.46-51). Yet the goals of a proposed national framework include the streamlining and strengthening of accountability, Commonwealth regulatory and funding responsibility, and an independent national tertiary education body for accreditation and quality assurance.

The balance of centralism and federalism, referred to in Ergas’ article, is at the heart of the place of the state and territory jurisdictions in a future ‘seamless’ tertiary education sector. Furthermore, Julia Gillard, the Commonwealth Education Minister, has hinted to *The Age* that the proposed radical reforms of Professor Bradley and her team might be too tough in the current “budget context”!

Further Reading

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