

## The Changing Landscape of Higher Education: Constructing Our Future Denise Kirkpatrick

*The Australian university sector faces significant change and challenge from a broad platform of Federal government reform. Government policy changes have introduced performance based funding relating to university learning and teaching, a Research Quality Framework to drive and reward university research, changes to the capacity of universities to charge fees, and relative changes in government funding of universities. There has been an increase in government regulatory intervention and audit that is directly inverse to the proportion of university income provided by the Federal government. Australian universities have had to respond to increased employer demands and government pressure for increasing diversity, accompanied by increased requirements of quality assurance and attention to academic standards. These changes have influenced the ways that universities do business, and present imperatives for future change. As the reform agenda continues to develop, and we continue to respond to it, what will it mean for the ways in which we see our professions and our role within universities?*

### The Context

Over the last two decades the Australian Higher Education sector has changed significantly. This includes an increased massification of education, exemplified by a shift from semi-elite to semi-mass provision of education which has resulted in increased student numbers, and a more diverse student population, with varied and markedly different student expectations of the university experience. The Higher Education sector has been characterised by a greater emphasis on professional and vocational programs driven more strongly by employer needs and expectations. This has had a substantial effect on the nature of the programs that are offered and the nature of outcomes for students. The proportion of university operating costs provided by government has diminished with an accompanying pressure on universities to develop alternate funding sources and associated need to open up new markets both on and off shore. Students are expected to pay a higher proportion of the cost of their university education and increasing deregulation of the sector will challenge the role of universities. Higher Education has become increasingly global and Australia's position in the international education market place has been seriously challenged.

The 2002 Ministerial paper *Higher Education at the Crossroads* paved the way for a new era in Australian higher education in which the Dawkins' era of unification is replaced by an emphasis on diversification. The subsequent reform package, *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future*, includes more than seventy reform strategies, and signals higher levels of government intervention in the activities of universities. The boundaries between universities and government are becoming permeable and moveable and accompanied by a shift from government to governance. Increased deregulation will expose Australian universities to greater domestic and international competition. The changed position of Australian higher education in the global economy, and the opening

of new, global markets, particularly educational markets, is placing increasing stress on the sector (Marginson, 1997). Government involvement now intrudes upon decisions about program offerings and levels of enrolment and includes significant incentives for universities to develop more efficient workplaces. The energies and attention of Australian universities are being directed towards increased competition for government funding via the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund and the Research Quality Framework, each with a focus on increased competition between universities and an emphasis on performance and excellence.

The current higher education reforms direct attention to priorities quite different from the goals of uniformity, growth and access sought by the Dawkins' reforms of the late 80s. The current focus is on institutional diversity and differentiated status between universities. It is argued that we need to accelerate this differentiation – that it is unrealistic to expect all universities to do the same things, that individual universities need to understand their business and their strengths, develop a strong sense of identity, move into new areas and that they need to let some things go. But this will require recognition that students' attitudes and values need to change as well. The emergence of the "Melbourne model" as one response to this pressure for differentiation will be a litmus test of the capacity of the public to understand the effects of differentiation between institutions. As more universities move to differentiate themselves we are likely to see changed patterns of staff and student mobility. What effect will greater diversity have on the current level of unity among institutions – we already have segmentation and development of identity through university groupings – eg Go8, ATN etc. It must be remembered that in order to define themselves and identify the points of differentiation, institutions must have a clear sense of their purpose and mission.

The '*Crossroads*' paper proposed a shift to a clear policy of differentiation within the sector. While it has been argued (Moses, 2004; Kemmis, 1999) that the unified national system actually exhibited substantial differentiation, this was not the goal of policy architecture. The current major policy driven changes in higher education will have a major effect on what counts as knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy and will lead to changes in the relationship between research and teaching.

The Research Quality Framework will allocate public funds for research on the basis of performance, concentrate research activity, and tie research funding to those areas assessed as achieving research outputs of international quality. This will have an effect on the research focus of individuals, and will shape the choices of institutions with regard to the research that they support, and the staff they attract and retain. The quality of research will receive as much emphasis as quantity, and this will increase differentiation among universities, with some institutions being pushed towards a teaching emphasis while others that have strong research performance will be strengthened. Universities are being encouraged to increase their research performance and reputation, while increasing their enter scores, raising prices, expanding full fee offerings, improving the quality of their teaching and further building research. Obviously, this is neither sustainable nor even achievable for all universities. The role of research performance in determining a university's mission and potential has become more central than before. However, it

seems likely that the capacity for broad based research will be severely limited. If universities persist with the model supported by the Dawkins reforms, that is, attempting to be all things, they will find themselves over-stretched, inhibiting their research potential and faced with the threat of loss of a research profile and possible teaching only status. We are beginning to see the emergence of even greater differentiation between universities in status, resources, mission and global roles. After all, this is the point of the reforms. What we need to avoid is the development of a situation in which some universities are forced to become low value teaching institutions, extremely niche focused and without a research pillar.

Among the *Backing Australia's Future* reforms is the introduction of performance funding for teaching in universities. This is the first time that significant attention has been given to university teaching and is accompanied by substantial financial reward and public recognition for universities that have been judged to achieve excellence in teaching. However I do not believe that we took advantage of the opportunity to interrogate what is meant by quality teaching, develop meaningful measures and stimulate wide public debate about the values suggested by particular definitions of quality teaching. If one compares the amount of time and resources that have been invested in designing the Research Quality Framework processes and measures with the limited development associated with Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, along with the extensive media coverage and debate about the processes and measures of quality and impact it is clear that far more attention has been focus on measuring and rewarding research activity and achievement. Within universities there has generally been far greater institutional and staff engagement with issues associated with RQF than with Learning and Teaching Performance Fund and it is difficult not to read a perpetuation of the privileging of research over teaching.

The proposed changes to the Government protocols that presently restrict funded HECS places and the title of 'university' to the established comprehensive institutions will open up the education market place and exert greater pressure on Australian universities. Changes to the protocols will allow entry to international and domestic teaching-only, private providers. If successful, the current efforts of the Federal Government to take over the legislative function of the states in higher education will give the Minister greater control over teaching, research, and industrial relations.

Rather than education being seen as serving a form of collective public good, participation in university education is now seen as a form of private investment. It is expected that students will pay a growing proportion of the cost of their education according to the increasingly influential philosophy of "user pays". Education has become a commodity to be produced, packaged, sold, outsourced, franchised and consumed. The rhetoric of choice has permeated Higher Education policy – students are regarded as consumers. Now this is not necessarily a bad thing - we should be concerned about the wants and needs of our students but constructing the student as consumer goes further than the notion of customer service – it supports the commodification of education. The teacher-student relationship is now more frequently seen as a contractual rather than a pedagogical relationship. Students are well aware of the costs of their

education and of what they are paying, now or in the future, and expect to receive 'value for money' for their investment. Indeed, they expect a decent return on their investment. We are constantly reminded that universities are "accountable to the taxpayers who sustain them" (Bishop, 2007) and when they fail to deliver the goods, they should pay for this.

Policy is directed at making higher education more efficient- this is initiated from Canberra and supported by industry groups who argue that education must be more efficient, more closely tied to the needs of industry and more business-like in its processes and practices. A key objective is the transformation of universities into corporate entities geared toward the ideal of making a profit and increasing efficiency and productivity. We are reminded how inefficient universities are and of the high level of wastage. Performance reviews at all levels and performance indicators have been seen to be necessary to ensure that the efficiency and market forces prevail. Performativity, the principle of optimising performance by technical innovation, (a "rhetorical practice which reifies efficiency", Mourad 1997, p. 31) is a defining feature of the current higher education landscape. Lyotard (1984) describes "the mercantilisation of knowledge" where knowledge will cease to be an end in itself. In relation to accountability in higher education there is increased attention given to the input-output equation.

Educational policy seeks to encourage the effective transmission of knowledge, and to develop the performativity of the social system. For example, there is an increasing demand for skills, experts who can inform higher and middle-management. New students are no longer just drawn from the liberal elite, nor do they simply enter this elite: there are new demands from students for professional training and for the development of new professions. The educational system now values the functions of job retraining and continuing education, knowledge tailored to individuals rather than offered en bloc, education for adults to improve their pay and promotion prospects, and to widen their occupational and social horizons. This reflects a growth in the role of extra-university networks which is likely to emerge since performativity breaks the monopoly of universities and weakens their claim for autonomy.

A feature of the reforms is the targeting of a greater proportion of funding to particular initiatives that align with government policy. Universities are increasingly accountable for demonstrating that they are responding these demands and are subject to increasing levels of regulation and examination. This increase in administrative work – meeting legislative compliance obligations, reporting is a by-product of the increased performativity that characterises higher education - a whole range of new organisational tasks has emerged with associated costs. For example estimates of the cost of the RQF for any university vary from one to one and a half million dollars. This is the cost of running the audit and does not take account of the costs incurred in attracting and retaining high performing research staff and building research strengths and teams. The government is also demanding that universities develop more efficient administrative practices and demonstrate higher levels of accountability. The university is engaged in increasing levels of administrative and organisational activities, spending large amounts of money on directly meeting the requirements of the system, whether it be research

performance reporting or describing quality. Staff time and resources are unavailable for allocation to teaching and research or supporting these activities because they have been redirected to meeting accountability requirements, collecting data and reporting. Is this really the business of universities?

In *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* the Australian Government announced the introduction of the Workplace Productivity Programme (WPP). This program provides incentives for higher education providers to progress workplace reform with a focus on improved productivity and performance. The program supports projects that “reform the efficiency, productivity and performance of institutions, strengthen their capability to manage and implement workplace change and contribute to the diversity of the higher education sector”. While the focus has been predominantly on the reform of human resource practices, the second round of this program has extended the scope from changes to management, leadership and governance capability, systems development, ... and productivity and performance to include the redesign of management and academic structures and different approaches to course offerings and delivery. Universities are being required to show that they are teaching more efficiently. With performance indicators that include: quantified cost reduction in the provision of support services; reduction in the number of business transactions, or quantitative shift in the nature of transactions (eg from counter based to internet based), more effective use of facilities; and more effective use of new technologies there is a clear intention to enhance institutional productivity and efficiency via the use of technology.

### The Business of Universities?

Deregulation and privatization reform strategies threaten the university’s pre-eminent standing as a provider of higher education. Universities will need to change in profound ways if they are to respond effectively and successful responses will demand a more sophisticated understanding of the core business in which universities are competing with other providers in a global market place.

In a recent *Campus Review* article, Professor Steven Schwartz, Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University posed the question “What is a university education?” and explored the question of just what it is we should expect an Australian university graduate to know. He argued that if universities are in the business of educating students, then they should they know what they want their students to learn. We should also be asking the questions about why we would we want them to learn these things and how they will learn. However, it is essential that we have a clear idea of just what it is universities are seeking to achieve. We need to make choices, to differentiate and identify what we consider is important, not everything is of equal value, and what we choose will depend on where we are and certainly on what type of university we think we are and want to be. But we must begin talking about these questions.

The core business of universities is education, preparing graduates for the current and future workforce. University teaching and learning is the means by which accredited, qualified, employable university graduates are produced. Because these are the activities

that provide the infrastructural resources which support other university activities such as primary knowledge production by way of research, innovation and industry collaboration the education of students must be seen as the primary activity of universities.

The education of students is irrevocably linked to the production and dissemination of knowledge and it is here that the role of universities is becoming less straight forward. Government policies that deregulate the market are weakening the central role of universities in knowledge production, and the contemporary world is challenging the taken-for-granted role of the university.

Michael Gibbons (1998) describes the changes in knowledge and the role of the university, arguing that the modes of production of knowledge are changing rapidly according to the imperatives of globalisation, acceleration, complexity, increasing risk and reflexivity; by the massification of higher education, by the attendant commodification, deregulation and privatization of the sector and by the spread of practices, potentialities and problematics of ICT. He argues that distributed knowledge production systems (or mode 2 knowledge) grow around the production and distribution of knowledge from disciplinary enclosures or silos (mode 1). According to this analysis, new modes of knowledge production are produced in the context of application, and are heterogeneous, and transient. They are transdisciplinary, collaborative and localised. Universities no longer have a monopoly on knowledge but are now an important part of a distributed system. Knowledge production, or research, and its re-contextualisation, dissemination, and reconstruction (through curriculum and pedagogy) are no longer self-contained activities carried out in silo-like isolation. Mode 2 knowledge production has a wide range of participants. Changes in the site and nature of knowledge production will have a profound effect on course development and the organisation and practices of curriculum and pedagogy and on what it means to be a university.

### The Learning and Teaching Professional

While these conditions have clear implications for the work of universities generally, they create particular imperatives for learning and teaching professionals. Appropriate responses will require the growth of a culture that supports and values true collaboration and open and inclusive exchange. Importantly there is a need for clear definition of what we mean when we refer to learning and teaching, learning and teaching support and learning and teaching professionals. In many ways this is still contested and murky territory. I believe that the current instability in learning and teaching units across Australian universities reflects our lack of clarity about what is involved and the appropriate relationships between various activities that form the business of the university. Without a clear sense of relationships and synergies we will continue to reorganize functions and responsibilities as we seek to determine the best mix of staff development, student support, pedagogy, policy, educational design, academic development and technology application and support. We are the ones who should be leading this debate and knowledge building. We can build capacities within institutions,

and exchange across institutions so that we generate and extend our knowledge of learning and teaching in higher education beyond our current, narrow boundaries.

In the current university context a wide range of professional and staff have a role in learning and teaching activities – but do we all see the world in the same way? I think we need to approach this in a more professional way – to start to define the professional attributes and beliefs associated with effective teaching and learning. However, in order to do this we need the intent. Importantly, we also need to develop a shared language or shared understandings and to create ways of bringing together professional groups in shared spaces.

In 2000 Cunningham voiced concerns that the traditional roles of teachers were being ‘unbundled’ and that disaggregation of the teaching-learning process would occur (Cunningham et al, 2000). While this warning was based on an analysis of the effect of new technologies it seems that that significant changes are beginning to occur in relation to academic work in response to Government pressure. We are seeing a growth in increased specialisation such as the appointment of teaching only academic staff, increased use of casual and sessional staff with very different expectations, and an increase in the use of general staff categories to perform what were previously considered teaching roles. Government pressure for increased efficiency and productivity encourages the development of these roles and the expectation that some of the pedagogical roles of teachers will be reduced.

Our own jobs have become increasingly complex and diverse. From a situation which focused primarily on supporting face to face teaching and the on-campus experience we now have to support distributed learning in a variety of settings. Staff now need assistance in identifying and using new technologies along with direction in how to use technology in pedagogically effective ways. There is a widespread expectation that teaching will be innovative, student-centred, flexible and responsive. Staff are expected to demonstrate that their teaching is research-informed and inclusive, addressing the needs of a diverse student population. They are increasingly expected to engage in the discourse of quality teaching and frequently lack the background or information to support these conversations. And of course we must ensure that we are providing teaching and learning spaces that support a range of pedagogies and teaching approaches and are equipped with all necessary technologies.

Our current levels of knowledge and understanding are inadequate for meeting current demands – we need more rigorous and systematic research investigating university pedagogy and curriculum. The insertion of new technologies introduces complexity and a raft of new questions relating to course delivery, program design and development, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

### Learning and Teaching Responses

Universities need to differentiate themselves from other competing providers, they can successfully do this by developing forms of scholarship that contribute to understanding and responding to these changes. However it seems that we have forgotten that

universities *are* in the business of educating learners and through this creating knowledge. We need proper levels of funding for developing a robust base of evidence and good data, along with consistent practice and self-awareness.

Learning and teaching cannot be considered as separate from the changes in knowledge production described previously, this is the defining feature of a university. We need increased attention and support for institutional research that informs us about the nature and effect of education that is occurring across the sector, not simply about what is happening in one class or one program in a single institution. We need better data sets relating to teaching quality to provide the kind of meaningful information that we need to drive change and response. We also need improved sharing of responses, mechanisms and infrastructure to support this but the will to break down the silos and a culture that values such engagement. We also need to examine just what we mean by 'learning and teaching' across areas and what constitutes a learning and teaching professional.

Universities are confronted by an escalating agenda for change driven by domestic deregulation, international free trade agreements, and international agreements such as the Bologna Accord. Questions about learning and teaching should be considered within a framework of broader debate about the future direction of higher education. We need to stimulate and support discussions of higher education courses, academic policies and structures, curricula and pedagogies, and to actively engage in broader academic debate about the role and function of the university in changing times. We need to engage policy agendas in relation to the purpose of the university and the centrality of teaching as contributing to knowledge production. We must ensure that high quality information is readily and systematically available to inform debate and foster critical inquiry. At the institutional level this means driving the type of information that is collected about university programs, and ensuring that this is readily available, in consistent and meaningful ways. Of course, collecting the information is only one aspect, we need effective ways of managing and sharing this information. Similarly, we need effective mechanisms for sharing the practices of learning and teaching development and academic staff development. Mechanisms for sharing knowledge, activities, and expertise among institutions will contribute to a more comprehensive information base and reduce the isolating effects of silo thinking and behaviour.

Some of the initiatives of the Carrick Institute such as the Carrick Exchange are designed to assist in this building and sharing of an information base. However, we must remember that simply building it will not assure use. Learning and teaching professionals need to recognise the value of exchange of ideas and practice, and actively engage in dissemination and comparison. We need sustained national debate about the purpose and work of universities- something that has been largely absent to date. This needs to be initiated and supported but importantly we need to participate and contribute to public discussion about issues in higher education. Too frequently the life of the learning and teaching professional is characterised by intellectual isolation, the challenge is to achieve better integration with the work of faculty staff and with other relevant units within the university. And it does need to be integration, our efforts at collaboration have been partially successful but we need to go further.

E-learning, a shared enterprise, requires us to move beyond the current evaluations of the effectiveness of any one pedagogical strategy. In our own practice we need to encourage and support a shift from being successful practitioners and gifted amateurs to professionals in learning and teaching. The bulk of the papers at this conference are practice based – there is little in the way of theorizing or of actively seeking to understand the implications of what we do or of asking big questions that apply across the sector. Analysis of the relevant higher education learning and teaching program streams of the 2007 AERA conference shows a similar pattern.

We need to start asking the serious questions about student learning and to commit to developing appropriate measures– not a crude ‘ruler’ that can be laid across any student or program but we must direct our attention to more active investigation of the possible legitimate measures of student learning that allow us to demonstrate with integrity the value of what we do and the difference that a three or four year commitment to university learning can make in an individual. We need to tackle with seriousness and commitment the difficult questions of engaging students in meaningful ways, ensuring that students leave the university altered in positive ways. We have to do this in ways that are more manageable and allow academics to focus on thinking about effective learning, that are capable of providing staff and students with convenience and flexibility without adding additional demands on their time. Generally, we have seen little in the way of development of new pedagogies. Despite the existence of effective, well designed online learning experiences that genuinely offer students and staff flexibility, most of what we still see occurring places the teacher very firmly in the centre of the experience. These approaches frequently demand staff spend more time interacting and responding, in addition to the time spent designing and building the activity.

The Federal government has been slow to recognise the increasing influence of technologies on learning and teaching higher education – there has been little attention given to supporting e-learning or the use of technologies to support learning and teaching. We have no strategic directions statements, no frameworks, no road maps and no investment in infrastructure to support e-learning. Individual universities have been solely responsible for developing e-learning policies, directions, infrastructure and assessment. There has been some central recognition of the role of technology in supporting research through funding for work on repositories and the e-framework but it is only in the second round of the workplace productivity program that the potential of technologies has emerged. And of course in this case technologies are seen as the means of cutting the costs of program delivery.

We need to argue for Federal government support for the IT infrastructure that will support new forms of teaching and alternate forms of student learning. This needs to be supported by effective training for the teachers who will be using these technologies. Realistically we should accept that many university staff still require basic training in using technologies before they can progress to effective technology mediated learning. We need to build effective systems for the management and support of the use of a wide

range of information and sources, across distributed environments and develop and manage integrated and shared repositories.

We haven't seriously tackled the questions and problems of re-use. We are still waiting for a genuine pragmatic ie useable and affordable solution to the storage and management but these issues are minor compared to the psychological barriers to re-use and adaptation of the resources and activities created by others. This is an area that requires significant investment in development of the systems and creation of a culture and practice base. There is a need for those of us responsible for leadership in learning and teaching to engage more with developments in repositories for research and look for ways in which we can leverage these developments in the learning and teaching space.

There are significant opportunities for universities to remake themselves- around collaboration, exploration and engagement with the wider world. Whether or not we choose to do this is up to us. We are surrounded by the notion of uncertainty – exemplified in the continuous shift of higher education towards a more market driven, business oriented model. As a socio-cultural process, education is intimately connected to the production and dissemination of foundational knowledge, and therefore, with the re-creation and reproduction of differential valuations and hierarchies of knowledge. Higher education is going through profound change in terms of purpose, methods and content. There is a need for a critical examination of the theory and practice of higher education for there is always more that can be said and more that can be done.

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