

What next for tertiary education?

Some preliminary sketches

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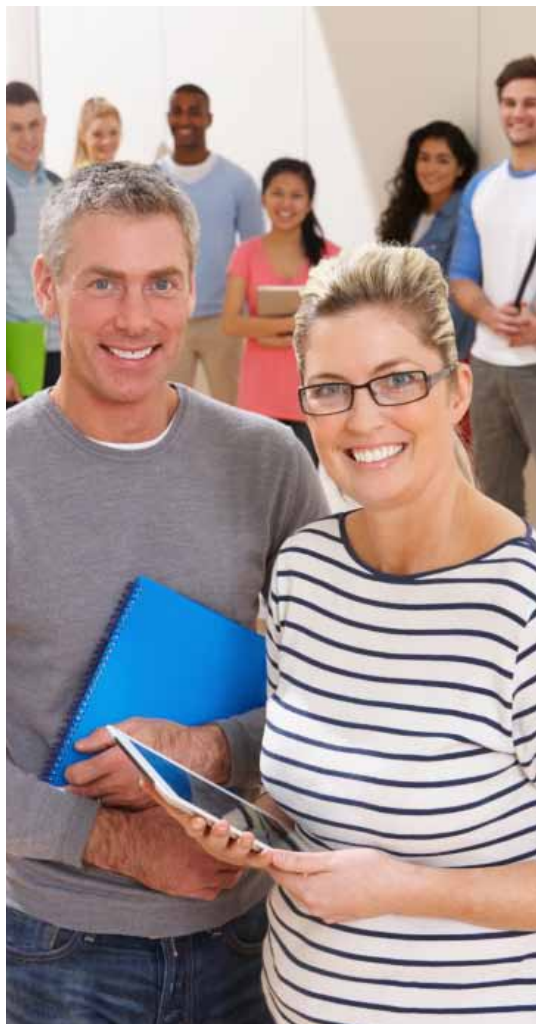
Foreword by Rod Camm, Managing Director NCVER

Looking at the past can teach us about what direction the future should take. In order to envisage some directions for tertiary education, a group of prominent thinkers from a variety of backgrounds, including higher education, vocational education and training (VET) and industry, met to reflect on Beddie's (2014) rereading of the Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education report (the Martin report). What ensued was a lively discussion around how tertiary education can overcome a series of problems that have plagued it for fifty years. This paper is the fruition of those conversations and sets the scene for many more discussions. With the constraints of the current environment set aside, the somewhat radical ideas conveyed in this paper are intended to spark debate and encourage further fresh thinking on the structure of tertiary education.

INTRODUCTION

Fifty years after the 1964 publication of the Martin report, a group of senior figures in tertiary education and training met to re-consider the binary policy of higher education that emerged from the report's recommendations. An analysis of the Martin report and the resulting policy can be found in the companion publication to this paper, *A differentiated model for tertiary education: past ideas, contemporary policy and future possibilities* (Beddie 2014). The focus of the Martin Committee's recommendations was on tertiary education (defined as diploma level and above) but the committee also noted the critical importance of a strong schooling sector and the continuing relevance of non-tertiary level vocational education and training.

To encourage a frank exchange and some blue-sky thinking the roundtable was conducted under Chatham House Rule. The ideas fashioned below owe much to the day's discussion. They are presented as a contribution to the current debate about the way tertiary education is structured. In particular, they aim to encourage a discussion that goes beyond dollars. It would be naive to relegate funding from its central place in the debate. Nevertheless, as Australia considers how to pay for a demand-driven system, which delivers excellence and equal opportunity, it is timely also to consider the historical legacies that underpin the structures and culture of tertiary education in Australia – and even to contemplate new ways of doing things. The future possibilities set out below are distilled into four areas that deserve fresh thinking: pathways from school or other vocational settings into advanced education; the way research is funded; the understanding of competency-based education; and collaborative governance.





Participants at the roundtable were asked: ‘Is education at a tipping point?’. This question was posed, given the historical analysis undertaken in the companion paper had identified a familiar set of ‘wicked’ – persistent and difficult – problems. These were grouped together into the following themes, upon which the roundtable discussion was based:

- diversity and parity of esteem in mass tertiary education
- pathways within education and to the labour market
- the place of research in mass tertiary education
- governance and institutional autonomy.¹

The question was expanded to ask whether, in 2014, various factors were coalescing to open up the possibility for serious structural change. These factors include some of the familiar challenges faced by education systems: a finite budget, changing skills demands, youth unemployment; and some newer ones: the fundamental shift in the way information is disseminated and knowledge produced, a global jobs market and an international education industry.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Policy-makers 50 years ago were confronted by the same dual challenge of expanding tertiary education and containing costs. Robert Menzies appointed the Martin Committee to tackle the problem. The committee reported during a time of virtual full employment. Its notion of a mass tertiary education system embraced the 20% of secondary school students who matriculated. It was based on the premise that tertiary education (sometimes interchanged with the term ‘higher education’ and meaning diploma and above) should be available to all citizens according to their inclination and capacity.

In 1965 Senator John Gorton oversaw the government’s response, which emerged as a binary system made up of universities and colleges of advanced education. Universities were deemed to have responsibilities for higher learning and research, for which they received specific funding, while the colleges were primarily to offer vocationally oriented programs, accompanied by relevant liberal studies, and to serve the community’s social and economic needs.

By the time the colleges were up and running in the 1970s, times had changed. The baby boom was over, the economy weaker and youth unemployment high. Moreover, the ideal of a system of equal but different institutions had foundered on a race to the top and problems in the marriage of higher vocational with liberal education. The binary policy was replaced in 1988 by the Dawkins ‘revolution’, which introduced a unified system intended to further expand tertiary education in a way that supported the reforms of the Hawke–Keating governments by producing graduates in fields the economy needed. What came about was an increasingly uniform set of higher education institutions, nearly all called ‘universities’, and a more singular focus on skills.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century that familiar pattern of Australian higher education, now made up primarily of around 39 universities, is dissolving.

¹ The accompanying report, *A differentiated model for tertiary education: past ideas, contemporary policy and future possibilities*, is organised around these themes, which emerged from the historical analysis. It is available at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2748.html>>.

It faces the unrelenting push for greater productivity and rise of global markets, including for:

- skills
- the introduction of a demand-driven funding model and competition from non-accredited higher education providers
- heightened discussion about contemporary occupational requirements
- persistent concerns about the quality.

As the system evolves, we are seeing experimentation with new approaches to undergraduate programs such as the Melbourne Curriculum,² the rise of the MOOCs (massive open online courses) and new institutional arrangements across the higher education–vocational education divide.

Like the roundtable discussion, the historical analysis in the companion paper (Beddie 2014), concentrates on tertiary education. However, it is clear that some of the problems plaguing all post-compulsory education stem from inadequacies in schooling. This was one of Martin’s concerns – he wanted teacher education upgraded and therefore proposed a trinary system, which would have included separate teachers colleges. That was shipwrecked on two other complications in the system: its federal governance arrangements and industrial relations.

The binary policy formulated in the mid-1960s suffered from a lack of clarity on fundamental questions about the types of knowledge, types of research and types of learning it was addressing. These opened the way to blurred boundaries and missions and the reaffirmation of a hierarchy of status. Today, we still suffer from vague usage of the word ‘tertiary’. We see fierce defence of the use of the word ‘university’, to protect self-accreditation and autonomy and adequate funding. Labels such as ‘competency-based’ and ‘training packages’ are not universally understood. They add to the fog that engulfs the VET sector.

The Martin report aimed at lifting the standing of more applied advanced learning. Its implementation was stymied not only by the hierarchy of prestige within tertiary education but also by entrenched occupational status. Today, the push coming from occupations to increase entry-level credentials and the emphasis being placed on diploma-level qualifications as pathways to degrees rather than reputable qualifications in themselves reduces the attraction of the paraprofessional jobs.

WHAT NEXT? THE ROUNDTABLE DELIBERATIONS

To change the system requires new mindsets not just among educationalists but also of employers, parents and students. What follows is a distillation of issues relevant to each of the themes identified in the historical essay and discussed at the roundtable. Each section ends with a preliminary sketch to inspire more work on the blueprints needed to renovate Australia’s educational structures.

These ideas are also discussed during an interview with Beddie on this paper, available at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2752.html>>.

The binary policy suffered from a lack of clarity on fundamental questions, which opened the way to blurred boundaries and missions, and reaffirmed the hierarchy of status.

2 The University of Melbourne’s model, introduced in 2008, offers six bachelor’s degrees in 87 fields. These programs aim to lay the intellectual foundations for employment or further study. Most professional qualifications are offered at master’s level.



Diversity and parity of esteem in mass tertiary education

One distinct difference between 1964 and 2014 is the level of qualification Australians require to find decent work. For the vast majority now, the labour market is demanding a non-school qualification, mainly at the level of certificate III and above, and increasingly at one degree or more. The numbers of Australians – and people across the globe³ – gaining degrees has grown rapidly in the last decades. That led Karmel (2013) to ask whether there were now too many university graduates. His answer was ‘not yet’, given the tendency of the labour market to continue to favour post-school qualifications, in general, in the predictable pecking order of postgraduate qualifications at the top, followed by bachelor degrees, diplomas and the certificates III/IV (plus Year 12 completion). Karmel emphasises the aggregate nature of his finding and its implications for future returns from the investment in a degree. This caution is borne out by recent research by McCrindle (2014) that shows there are more graduates with less work and more debt.⁴ McCrindle also looks at outcomes for graduates in different fields of study. He shows that the most popular degrees – arts, law, the social sciences, psychology – are not leading to jobs in those fields, with graduates moving to further study or to a different field or to lower starting salaries. That must prompt the question of whether the nation can afford an approach that requires people entering the labour market to acquire more and more credentials.

Diversity

The principle underpinning the Martin Committee’s deliberations on expanding opportunities for tertiary education was that applied at the same time in Britain by Lord Robbins: places should be ‘available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do’ (cited in Willetts 2013, p. 16). Martin and many of his contemporaries thought there was a tier of practical men and women within the ranks of those who had matriculated who deserved an advanced education to lead them into the professions. While keen to preserve a set of elite institutions – universities – dedicated to highly academic learning and research, the binary policy was the first step towards mass tertiary education. Today the notion of matriculation has changed, with a wide variation of scores required to get into university courses. Entry into higher education has opened up but with the side effects of uneven quality, or perceptions thereof, and uneven outcomes (attrition rates are higher in those universities with significant numbers of low-socioeconomic status (SES) students), as well as fierce contest among institutions to sell their brand. Despite incentives to attract greater numbers of lower-SES students, expansion has applied more to people with lesser ability than to those from less privileged backgrounds.

While there is a plethora of choice for students entering tertiary education, there is still a lack of good information to help them to decide to do a diploma rather than a degree, to choose one university over another, and to enter the right field of study. Clear data about the costs of education and likely pathways into employment remain inadequate.

- 3 According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and development (OECD 2012), on current trends, 40% of all young people in G20 and OECD countries will have a tertiary education qualification by the year 2020, posing the question of whether returns on education will continue to accrue to the individual. Another question raised by this changing educational profile is the implication for older less-qualified people needing to find new jobs as old industries disappear.
- 4 According to the Australian Government Actuary, it is likely that \$7.1 billion of the \$30.1 billion outstanding HELP (Higher Education Loan Program) debt at 30 June 2013 will not be repaid (cited in Norton 2014, p.9).

Nor has the blurring of boundaries between school, VET and universities yet resulted in enough real institutional diversity in Australia's tertiary system. Much of this blurring comes from competition for the education dollar, in particular Commonwealth Supported Places, over which the universities have had a near monopoly, although mooted changes to the demand-driven system (Kemp & Norton 2014) has recommended that this change. The competition has also seen universities encroach on the diploma market and TAFE institutes and other providers now offer degrees. Another contributor to the confusion is the lack of clarity about what VET qualifications signal about a graduate's knowledge, skills and capabilities.

Parity of esteem

The binary policy was infused by the aspiration to create a system of equal but different institutions. It failed. The colleges of advanced education came to look more like universities, while TAFE institutes were pressed – until the 2000s – to relinquish their paraprofessional education. A distinct kind of higher education for the practically minded student with a good sense of his or her vocational direction was lost. This was not only a function of the policy settings; it stemmed also from traits within the sector and the broader community: institutional snobbery, professional aspirations for higher credentials, and the failure to sell the idea of 'advanced' education to the public.

The hierarchy that sees vocational education as lower than higher education (most of which is vocational) is driven primarily by the status of occupations. Thus, a change in the esteem afforded to educational institutions rests at least as much with industry as it does with educationalists. Prompted by the huge cost of university education and high university graduate unemployment, the Republic of Korea is tackling this issue by introducing elite 'Meister High Schools' to persuade students (and their parents) to choose vocational education pathways. This involves strengthening vocational education at the secondary school level to attract high-performing middle school students and ensure that high school graduates develop the competencies demanded by companies. The Korean Government is also encouraging graduates from these schools to take an alternative route into higher learning, via a job where the individual can earn nationally accredited qualifications. The premise is that the student can then make a better-informed choice about the next step in their education (Park 2012).

Korea's approach, influenced by the Germanic system, relies on the cooperation of employers and on their willingness to recruit young people with little prior experience. Indeed, strong partnerships between industry and education in all aspects of delivery, from curriculum design to assessment, is necessary in any move away from employers using educational attainment primarily as a screening process rather than a signal of a well-prepared entry-level worker.

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WHAT NEXT?

Restructure pathways from school into diverse tertiary institutions

Global economic trends mean the need to have higher tertiary education qualifications will continue. This poses a question about the affordability of the system. In Australia, a recent review (Kemp & Norton 2014) has endorsed the demand-driven system and recommended its expansion to include sub-bachelor courses and non-university higher education providers. To pay for this, the review points to lifting caps on student contributions to their education. Subsequently, the removal of the maximum student contribution for all Commonwealth support students was announced in the 2014–15 Federal Budget, along with a reduction in the subsidy (Department of Education 2014). It is also a good time to look beyond money and debate whether the current structures are the most effective way for students to move through post-school education.

The importance of secondary schooling

Any recommendation for the structural reform of tertiary education must be predicated on a sound secondary school education. Usually, however, the two tiers are considered separately. Given the blurring of the educational boundaries – with VET taught in schools, TAFE institutes offering degrees and universities teaching high school students – it is time to rethink the classical model. The labour market’s demand for post-school qualifications also suggests it is time to create different learning trajectories for young adults from school to work and further study.

The academic track does not suit all secondary school students. For some, their compulsory education might be better completed in a vocational setting, either in an apprenticeship or adult learning environment or in high-quality VET in Schools programs. Selecting the right pathway requires strong career advice and a significant overhaul of the image of the vocational alternative, as well as a major improvement in its outcomes. To be successful, all candidates must have acquired strong literacy and numeracy skills.

For others the last years of school may still be a time when they need strong general education, combined with good career advice and meaningful work experience, to help them make informed choices about their future education and training. Given that Year 12 completion is rarely a sufficient qualification for the labour market, post-school education should have a first phase that prepares students for higher education and/or work. This would, to borrow Senator Gorton’s 1965 words, provide a breadth of study that allowed them to ‘develop critical imagination and creative abilities’.

An alternative structure

An alternative structure for mass tertiary education would see a majority attend establishments devoted to adapting students to learning at the tertiary level, with this occurring in the first two years (13 and 14) after completion of Year 12 or a vocational equivalent.⁵ This would sit at level five (short-cycle tertiary education) stipulated in the 2011 revision of the International Standard Classification of Education. Those with a strong idea of their vocational direction might be streamed into institutions that vertically integrate broad occupational training and education in a certain field; for example, in health, teaching or engineering. Such institutions would offer qualifications ranging from the certificate to the doctorate. Their focus would be on teaching and research relevant to their industries. They would employ ‘practical professors’, with sound links to their professions; their research would be cutting edge. Students would have opportunities to move in and out of the workforce and higher learning.

5 The Canadian province of Québec has introduced a staged approach to higher education, in which general and vocational colleges (known as CÉGEPs or collèges d’enseignement général et professionnel) deliver two-year pre-university programs leading to university studies and three-year technical programs that prepare students for the job market while, in some cases, leaving them the option of continuing their studies at the university level (<<http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/index.php?id=12>>).

Some preliminary sketches

This educational stage would impart knowledge and skills, and develop capabilities as well as competence (see Wheelahan & Moodie 2011). The challenge would be to avoid the practical versus academic dichotomy and instead improve the foundations of all tertiary education, whether the exit be at sub-degree level or in preparation for successful university completion. Such a structure has the potential to cater for international student market but would require good marketing and the maintenance of high standards.

Other Year 13 and 14 students would be prepared for later years of professional education or progression into a research-intensive university, strong in both pure and applied research. The former might also be the preserve of niche institutions, business schools, for example.

To ensure equal opportunity for capable students from all socioeconomic backgrounds, entrance requirements into these elite universities would have to be rigorous and scholarships available to those unable to afford the suite of costs associated with study.

One lesson from the experience of the colleges of advanced education is the imperative to embark on such structural change only after achieving widespread support for the new institutions. Without this, cultural legacies, internal politics and poor public understanding will work against the goal of greater differentiation in advanced tertiary education options. Another lesson is the importance of arrangements that enable movement within the system, both domestically and internationally (see below).

Pathways within education and to the labour market

The binary policy had envisaged that, once in the system, people would be able to move from one part to another. In 1993, looking back on the policy, Don McNicol, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney, listed several reasons why transfer of credit from the college sector to university was so difficult to negotiate: incompatibilities in the curriculum; lack of enforceable policies on credit transfer; and university suspicion of the standards of college courses (cited in Meek & Harman 1993, p.23). We have not learned from history. These remain the obstacles to transfer from VET to higher education in the current tertiary environment.

Transfer systems have also faltered on the academic—practical divide. Today this is seen most acutely in the clash between competency- and curriculum-based approaches but also in the issue of how best to recognise prior learning. Among the hindrances are language and red tape. Such obstacles can be addressed but should be done so with a clear view of the common goal, namely, imparting the skills and capabilities learners need to operate in the knowledge society. These skills have been summed up by Humburg and van der Velden (2013) as professional expertise, flexibility, innovation and knowledge management, mobilisation of human resources, international orientation and entrepreneurship.

Overcoming institutional barriers

There are also institutional barriers to be overcome. Again, clarity of purpose is essential to the task. In California, to which Martin looked for ideas, the mission of the three-tier tertiary system, set in place in 1960, and how to transfer within it, are legislated. While this has defined roles, the mandate has not encouraged sufficient collaboration on articulation and has restricted the system's ability to respond to change. In a first-ever meeting in 2014, the leaders of the three institutions (University of California, California State University and Californian Community

The common goal of any transfer system within tertiary education should be to impart the skills and capabilities learners need to operate in the knowledge society.



Colleges) announced plans for cooperation on procurement costs and greater efforts to facilitate community college transfers to university. They plan to create a comprehensive transfer student internet portal where students can keep track of coursework, transfer requirements and financial aid information (Grubaugh 2014).

Building trust and partnerships

Building trust between institutions is the essential element in a good transfer system but should not rely on individuals. As Watson, Hagel and Chesters (2013) have shown, strong policies within universities that support pathways from VET are important. The success in New South Wales of the Tertiary Pathway (a collaboration between TAFE, several universities and the industry skills council, Innovation and Business Skills Australia) shows that, when partners understand each other well, it is possible to offer education that delivers practical, employment-ready graduates. These NSW students embark on a clearly delineated pathway from an associate degree in TAFE, which equates to the first two years of a degree, should they decide to continue to study at university. The partnership means the individual does not have to negotiate credits from a university. These are automatic if the student has met all the terms and conditions set out. If they choose not to continue, they have a well-recognised qualification with which to enter the workforce.

Competency-based education

With employers wanting skilled graduates, there is an urgent need to rescue the notion of competency-based education, which has suffered from too close an association with narrowly defined job requirements. For many employers the maze of training packages and their increasing flexibility are confusing. They do not know whether the learner has acquired sufficient underpinning knowledge or how comparable the qualification is across the country. In engineering, the VET diploma is less preferred than the associate degree for this reason. Furthermore, the associate degree is usually not seen as an end point but as a stepping point to a full engineering qualification.

Competency-based training should be more than the replication of competencies. It must foster conceptual thinking – now a necessity for all workers. In many areas, notably the health care and community services sector, competency-based learning makes sense, especially when it gears its learning plans to the individual. In an industry with a large proportion of older workers needing to be upskilled, this personalised approach, which draws on prior experience but also addresses weaknesses, suits. A leading Canadian health educator advocates more competency-based learning to support career turns in the industry and to take advantage of technology at all tiers of the workforce (Tepper 2013).

More integrated education could also support teams-based approaches to work, which are now widely encouraged. In the care sector, for example, the evidence is mounting that when doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other health providers work in a more integrated way the quality of delivery improves and patients do better. Learning together would also inspire greater trust in the learning and assessment approaches, thereby facilitating transfer from sub-degree to degree courses, as well as access to work placements and expensive technology.

WHAT NEXT?

Lift the reputation of applied learning

Any future direction in tertiary education must acknowledge that for most this is a vocational pathway. The value of applied learning needs an image boost.

For those already aspiring to a particular career, the possibility of studying in an institution devoted to that occupational grouping may offer a fuller educational palette and variety of pathways. It may even help to lift the status of sub-professional qualifications. This would depend also on the attitude of professional associations and the breaking-down of hierarchies within certain occupations. For example, as Ducker and Breadon (2014) have recently argued, nurses have the scope to do more than they do at present and there is room for many more nurse assistant jobs than the hospitals currently employ.

Helping students make informed choices

Informed choice is essential to contain costs, both to the individual and to the state. Prospective students must have easily accessible data about the full costs of courses and straightforward information about pathways to further study and jobs. Portals like My Skills and My Universities are just the start.

The VET sector must lift the reputation of its offerings. This requires collaboration between educators and industry to ensure that employers have confidence in the qualifications delivered and that students are equipped with foundation skills (literacy and numeracy as well as employability skills), technical knowledge and conceptual ability. Technology can help here. Simulation, for example, allows for exciting new learning approaches. Crucially, the VET workforce must be properly equipped to undertake tertiary teaching and scholarship, and supported to maintain their industry involvement.

Getting the balance right

That industry and the professions have a role to play in shaping tertiary education is a given. The problem seems to lie in the over-prescription of standards, which quickly ossify with the changing nature of work and the economy. That should not, however, cast doubt on the underlying principle of competency-based education, which has, for example, underpinned much of the work of the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition since the early 1990s (Gonczy 1990). That principle, infused with a commitment to adding an element of liberal education to skills instruction, could serve the system well. However, to engender trust across existing tertiary institutions, it must urgently adopt a more rigorous – and graded – assessment process, one based on external moderation and validation.

Transfer does not work by administrative fiat. It depends on trust and strong collaborations. These have existed for decades but have not been harnessed as a systematic element in the VET–higher education interface. Strong institutional and policy leadership is needed, combined with robust accreditation and quality assurance.



The place of research in mass tertiary education

The binary policy attempted to make a distinction between universities, which were to be funded to undertake research – an emerging activity in 1960s Australia – and colleges, which were to apply knowledge. This dichotomy caused fatal flaws in the system, with a scramble for a bigger piece of the funding pie and for the status attached to research. Fifty years on, research is seen as the essence of a university, although often subsidised by dollars derived from teaching expanding student numbers. Teaching-only positions or faculties are interpreted as second class.

Removing the teaching–research divide

It is time to end the teaching–research divide in tertiary education and the dichotomy of pure versus applied research. To avoid these clashes, it is useful to recognise that scholarship is an inherent part of all tertiary education, whose role is to cultivate the creative minds needed in the twenty-first century workforce, including those employed in the tertiary education system.

With content now coming from everywhere, we need to reimagine the tertiary teacher, to see them as a person who can transmit capability in using evidence and analysis rather than functioning as a one-way channel of information. Siemens, a specialist in pedagogy, sees this one-way flow as a limitation also of massive online open courses (MOOCs). He urges academics to take the reins of MOOCs and harness their enormous power to reach not only new students but also to find new ways of peer learning (cited in Trounson 2014).

One of Australia's recent Nobel Prize winners, Brian Schmidt (2013), has not shied away from an elitist model. He advocates that his university, the Australian National University (another Menzian creation), should become a premier research university with a small, carefully selected student population (relying on interviews as well as tertiary admission scores). These students, with high academic orientation, would engage in research-led teaching reminiscent of Harvard, Princeton, Oxford and Cambridge. The university's research would be fundamental and distinctive and rewarded accordingly. It would also have sound links to the real world through joint ventures with industry and organisations like the CSIRO.

Fostering innovation

The future infrastructure of tertiary education will focus less on physical campuses, although these will remain important meeting places for both students and researchers, with many of the latter retaining teaching loads. The interplay between research students and their supervisors is an ingredient in innovation. Another is the establishment of connections beyond academia. The persistent lament about Australia's research is that it does not translate into commercial success. Partnerships with industry could help to increase innovation and secure greater cost sharing for research. Where these included vocational education providers, which have a good track record of collaborating with employers and of translating research and knowledge into practice (see Curtin, Stanwick & Beddie 2011), some of the barriers between notions of pure and applied research and the narrow definition of excellence created by the focus on publication might dissolve.

WHAT NEXT?

Decouple funding for research and teaching

The funding of research is labyrinthine. To simplify it is no easy task; yet, the principle of diversity may help to guide decisions on the allocation of public funds and reduce the huge effort devoted to trying to win competitive grants (which rarely cover the full cost of the research activity) and achieve academic rankings. This would involve acceptance of the need to explicitly support the research infrastructure of designated research units across the tertiary sector. The danger in more restricted eligibility for research infrastructure finance is that it would deepen the teaching–research divide. The system also needs to incorporate explicit funding for quality tertiary teaching that supports the scholarly practice in which all teachers should engage and includes a focus on new ways of delivery, be these MOOCs, software applications or simulations.

Governance and institutional autonomy

Freedom and autonomy will be the hallmarks of this Government’s approach to universities. As we reduce the burden of regulation on universities, I would urge you to grasp your destiny into your own hands. Each institution should be clear about its purpose and its goals, and pursue its own goals as well, as distinctively, and as innovatively as it can – and for this, I provide my strong support. (Pyne 2014)

The current Commonwealth Minister for Education has signalled a clear return to greater autonomy for universities. In doing so he invoked the Menzian belief that universities should pursue the unfettered truth. In championing greater freedom for the universities, the minister might extend his view to regulation across the entire tertiary sector – defined as those educational institutions delivering qualifications at the diploma level and above. All need to find the right balance between accountability for the public dollar they receive and the liberty to realise their individual missions.

One of the circumstances that encouraged uniformity rather than diversity in the binary system was the dual regulation of the colleges of advanced education, which had to deal with both Commonwealth and state bureaucracies. This was an inevitable by-product of federalism, frustrating attempts to create a balanced system of advanced education in which the Commonwealth had primary responsibility for universities and made a financial contribution to the colleges, while the states retained the power to use their control of the training system as an economic policy instrument.

Competition for the funding dollar

Over the decades, the shifting funding arrangements and growing complexity of the VET system have weakened its efficacy as a policy tool and its reputation for excellence. While Australia continues to have a relatively good, diverse and open tertiary system, it is threatened by competition, above all for the funding dollar. In some cases this is leading to innovative partnerships between TAFE institutes and universities but it is also undermining commitment to the community service objectives that have for so long been a hallmark of the TAFE sector and universities.

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The reform frenzy also makes it nigh impossible for institutions to remain responsive to constantly changing regulation and reporting requirements. In 1973, Engineers Australia gave the sector 15 years' notice about changes to the professional qualification, which would require an additional year of education. While such lead times may be utopian in the twenty-first century, greater stability in the governance of the system is highly desirable. The current VET system is crippled by uncertain funding as well as complex and changing regulation, which has disrupted its place in the tertiary market ever since the time of the Martin report.

Control and clear missions

Effective coordination of all the voices with a stake in the system has proved elusive. In the latter days of the binary system, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission was formed to keep close control of the balance between degree, diploma and associate diploma enrolments and to avoid academic drift in the colleges. With some university leaders now suggesting it is a model worth revisiting, Marginson (2012) observed that, although inside government, the commission remained partly independent of the minister of the day. It built strong expertise, encouraged public discussion and took the long view. Its downfall was to get too close to the sector it was meant to regulate.

Lee Dow and Braithwaite (2013) have called for 'a mission-based compact process [which] allows for open and frank discussion about a provider's mission, strengths and challenges'. They were talking about higher education but the idea could be extended across the tertiary system. Indeed, Lee Dow argues (in Beddie, O'Connor & Curtin 2013, pp.57–8) that each institution needs to play 'to its strengths to create a whole which exceeds the sum of its parts'. It is at this level of the whole that governments and regulators should focus their gaze.

WHAT NEXT?

Unite governance of the system

The tertiary system – regulators and funders at both Commonwealth and state levels, the institutions themselves and the professions – needs a new mentality which recognises that not all forms of advanced education have the same purpose or need the same funding. According parity to diverse institutions is an almost insurmountable challenge when the system operates within an established hierarchy of prestige and across a federation. As the binary experiment taught us, the system must be funded and regulated on a firm community-wide appreciation of individual merits. That understanding is enhanced by clear definitions – for example, of 'tertiary' education – and by clear missions, as well as an acceptance that the nation needs an elite research-intensive endeavour.

As Menzies acknowledged, the enterprise of university education is 'vastly expensive' (cited in Beddie 2014, p.9). The way governments contribute funds to that enterprise can have powerful effects on its operations. To remain affordable, it is vital that the tertiary education Australians receive is efficiently constructed to meet both their individual aspirations and those of the nation. That means ensuring that people are appropriately educated for jobs as well as encouraging the pursuit of pure learning, which nurtures creativity and flexibility. This requires a good hold on economic drivers at local, state and federal levels, as well as trust in the instincts of individuals and respect for the principle of academic freedom.

IN CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A DIFFERENTIATED SYSTEM

A tipping point presents the opportunity to think differently. The sketches presented here are designed to help prompt debate about how to construct a system that can afford excellence in research as well as high-quality tertiary education and training catering to Australian and international demand for advanced qualifications.

It suggests a more staged tertiary progression, either from comprehensive teaching institutions to universities offering professionally oriented education or more research-intensive activity, or within vertically integrated institutions that offer education and training from certificate to postgraduate levels for a family of occupations. All elements would be underpinned by research and scholarship and creative uses of the technology that is transforming how we learn.

In deciding who is entitled to public places in the tertiary system, the Robbins principle of making places ‘available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do’ offers a good starting point. For this to be affordable depends on strong secondary education, effective career advice, rigorous entry requirements and scholarships to ensure that all those with ability are able to pursue their aspirations.

The system would support those who had the capability and the desire to move from one part to another to fulfil their potential and remain engaged workers and citizens. Its differentiation would be achieved by nurturing greater status for applied learning and for middle-level qualifications and their occupations on the one hand, and more targeted use of research funds on the other.

Governance structures have to embrace the role of coordination of the providers accredited to be part of the system. They must avoid encouraging competition to reach the top of a single pyramid. This can be done by fostering individual missions and rewarding partnerships that achieve innovation and productivity so, as Martin put it, ‘that Australia makes a worthwhile contribution to the advancement of knowledge and of achievement’ (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia 1964–65, vol.1, p.1).

We need to nurture greater status for applied learning and middle-level occupations, while making better use of targeted research funds.



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